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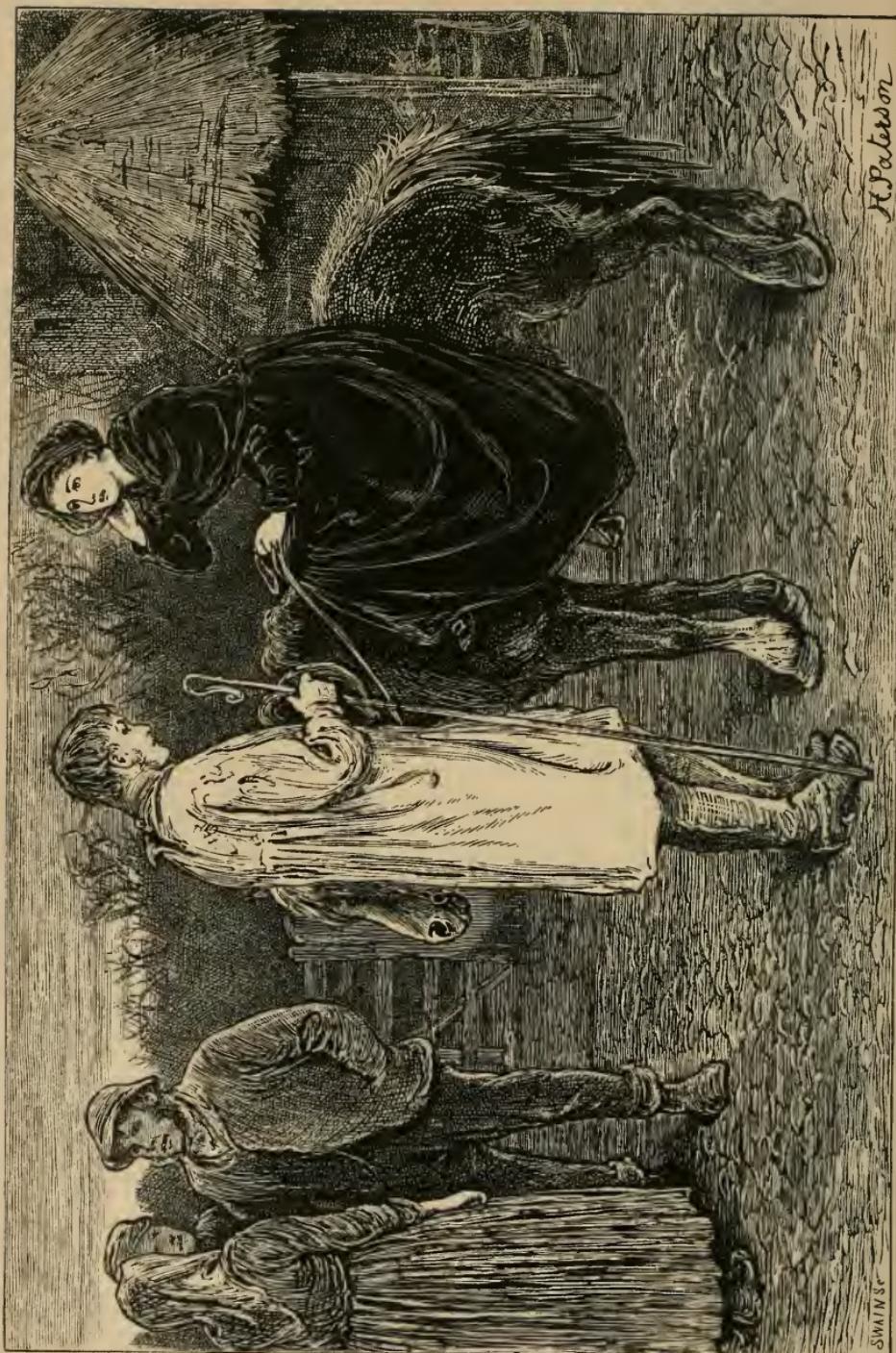
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FAR FROM THE MADDING CROWD.

BY THOMAS HARDY,

AUTHOR OF

"A PAIR OF BLUE EYES," "UNDER THE GREENWOOD TREE," ETC.

WITH TWELVE ILLUSTRATIONS.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

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FAR FROM THE MADDING CROWD.

CHAPTER I.

DESCRIPTION OF FARMER OAK—AN INCIDENT.

WHEN Farmer Oak smiled, the corners of his mouth spread till they were within an unimportant distance of his ears, his eyes were reduced to mere chinks, and diverging wrinkles appeared round them, extending upon his countenance like the rays in a rudimentary sketch of the rising sun.

His Christian name was Gabriel, and on working days he was a young man of sound judgment, easy motions, proper dress, and general good character. On Sundays he was a man of misty views, rather given to a postponing treatment of things, whose best clothes and seven-and-sixpenny umbrella were always hampering him: upon the whole, one who felt himself to occupy morally that vast middle space of Laodicean neutrality

which lay between the Sacrament people of the parish and the drunken division of its inhabitants—that is, he went to church, but yawned privately by the time the congregation reached the Nicene creed, and thought of what there would be for dinner when he meant to be listening to the sermon. Or, to state his character as it stood in the scale of public opinion, when his friends and critics were in tantrums, he was considered rather a bad man; when they were pleased, he was rather a good man; when they were neither, he was a man whose moral colour was a kind of pepper-and-salt mixture.

Since he lived six times as many working days as Sundays, Oak's appearance in his old clothes was most peculiarly his own—the mental picture formed by his neighbours always presenting him as dressed in that way when their imaginations answered to the thought “Gabriel Oak.” He wore a low-crowned felt hat, spread out at the base by tight jamming upon the head for security in high winds, and a coat like Dr. Johnson's; his lower extremities being encased in ordinary leather leggings and boots emphatically large, affording to each foot a roomy apartment so constructed that any wearer might stand in a river all day long and know nothing about it—their maker being a conscientious man who always

endeavoured to compensate for any weakness in his cut by unstinted dimension and solidity.

Mr. Oak carried about him, by way of watch, what may be called a small silver clock; in other words, it was a watch as to shape and intention, and a small clock as to size. This instrument being several years older than Oak's grandfather, had the peculiarity of going either too fast or not at all. The smaller of its hands, too, occasionally slipped round on the pivot, and thus, though the minutes were told with the greatest precision, nobody could be quite certain of the hour they belonged to. The stopping peculiarity of his watch Oak remedied by thumps and shakes, when it always went on again immediately, and he escaped any evil consequences from the other two defects by constant comparisons with and observations of the sun and stars, and by pressing his face close to the glass of his neighbours' windows when passing by their houses, till he could discern the hour marked by the green-faced timekeepers within. It may be mentioned that Oak's fob being painfully difficult of access, by reason of its somewhat high situation in the waistband of his trousers (which also lay at a remote height under his waistcoat), the watch was as a necessity pulled out by throwing the body extremely to one side, compressing the

mouth and face to a mere mass of ruddy flesh on account of the exertion required, and drawing up the watch by its chain, like a bucket from a well.

But some thoughtful persons, who had seen him walking across one of his fields on a certain December morning—sunny and exceedingly mild—might have regarded Gabriel Oak in other aspects than these. In his face one might notice that many of the hues and curves of youth had tarried on to manhood: there even remained in his remoter crannies some relics of the boy. His height and breadth would have been sufficient to make his presence imposing, had they been exhibited with due consideration. But there is a way some men have, rural and urban alike—for which the mind is more responsible than flesh and sinew—a way of curtailing their dimensions by their manner of showing them; and from a quiet modesty that would have become a vestal, which seemed continually to impress upon him that he had no great claim on the world's room, Oak walked unassumingly, and with a faintly perceptible bend, quite distinct from a bowing of the shoulders. This may be said to be a defect in an individual if he depends for his valuation as a total more upon his appearance than upon his capacity to wear well, which Oak did not.

He had just reached the time of life at which “young” is ceasing to be the prefix of “man” in speaking of one. He was at the brightest period of masculine life, for his intellect and his emotions were clearly separated: he had passed the time during which the influence of youth indiscriminately mingles them in the character of impulse, and he had not yet arrived at the stage wherein they become united again, in the character of prejudice, by the influence of a wife and family. In short, he was twenty-eight, and a bachelor.

The field he was in sloped steeply to a ridge called Norcombe Hill. Through a spur of this hill ran the highway from Norcombe to Casterbridge, sunk in a deep cutting. Casually glancing over the hedge, Oak saw coming down the incline before him an ornamental spring waggon, painted yellow and gaily marked, drawn by two horses, a waggoner walking alongside bearing a whip perpendicularly. The waggon was laden with household goods and window plants, and on the apex of the whole sat a woman, young and attractive. Gabriel had not beheld the sight for more than half a minute, when the vehicle was brought to a standstill just beneath his eyes.

“The tailboard of the waggon is gone, Miss,” said the waggoner.

"Then I heard it fall," said the girl, in a soft, though not particularly low voice. "I heard a noise I could not account for when we were coming up the hill."

"I'll run back."

"Do," she answered.

The sensible horses stood perfectly still, and the waggoner's steps sank fainter and fainter in the distance.

The girl on the summit of the load sat motionless, surrounded by tables and chairs with their legs upwards, backed by an oak settle, and ornamented in front by pots of geraniums, myrtles, and cactuses, together with a caged canary—all probably from the windows of the house just vacated. There was also a cat in a willow basket, from the partly-opened lid of which she gazed with half-closed eyes, and affectionately surveyed the small birds around.

The handsome girl waited for some time idly in her place, and the only sound heard in the stillness was the hopping of the canary up and down the perches of its prison. Then she looked attentively downwards. It was not at the bird, nor at the cat; it was at an oblong package tied in paper, and lying between them. She turned her head to learn if the waggoner were coming. He was not yet in sight; and then her eyes crept

back to the package, her thoughts seeming to run upon what was inside it. At length she drew the article into her lap, and untied the paper covering; a small swing looking-glass was disclosed, in which she proceeded to survey herself attentively. Then she parted her lips and smiled.

It was a fine morning, and the sun lighted up to a scarlet glow the crimson jacket she wore, and painted a soft lustre upon her bright face and black hair. The myrtles, geraniums, and cactuses packed around her were fresh and green, and at such a leafless season they invested the whole concern of horses, waggon, furniture, and girl with a peculiar charm of rarity. What possessed her to indulge in such a performance in the sight of the sparrows, blackbirds, and unperceived farmer, who were alone its spectators—whether the smile began as a factitious one, to test her capacity in that art, nobody knows; it ended certainly in a real smile. She blushed at herself, and seeing her reflection blush, blushed the more.

The change from the customary spot and necessary occasion of such an act—from the dressing hour in a bedroom to a time of travelling out of doors—lent to the idle deed a novelty it certainly did not intrinsically possess. The picture was a delicate one. Woman's prescriptive infirmity had stalked into the sunlight, which had

invested it with the freshness of an originality. A cynical inference was irresistible by Gabriel Oak as he regarded the scene, generous though he fain would have been. There was no necessity whatever for her looking in the glass. She did not adjust her hat, or pat her hair, or press a dimple into shape, or do one thing to signify that any such intention had been her motive in taking up the glass. She simply observed herself as a fair product of Nature in a feminine direction, her expressions seeming to glide into far-off though likely dramas in which men would play a part—vistas of probable triumphs—the smiles being of a phase suggesting that hearts were imagined as lost and won. Still, this was but conjecture, and the whole series of actions were so idly put forth as to make it rash to assert that intention had any part in them at all.

The waggoner's steps were heard returning. She put the glass in the paper, and the whole again into its place.

When the waggon had passed on, Gabriel withdrew from his point of espial, and descending into the road, followed the vehicle to the turnpike-gate at the bottom of the hill, where the object of his contemplation now halted for the payment of toll. About twenty steps still remained between him and the gate, when he heard a dispute. It was a

difference concerning twopence between the persons with the waggon and the man at the toll-bar.

"Mis'ess's niece is upon the top of the things, and she says that's enough that I've offered ye, you grate miser, and she won't pay any more." These were the waggoner's words.

"Very well; then mis'ess's niece can't pass," said the turnpike-keeper, closing the gate.

Oak looked from one to the other of the disputants, and fell into a reverie. There was something in the tone of twopence remarkably insignificant. Threepence had a definite value as money—it was an appreciable infringement on a day's wages, and, as such, a higgling matter; but twopence—"Here," he said, stepping forward and handing twopence to the gatekeeper; "let the young woman pass." He looked up at her then; she heard his words, and looked down.

Gabriel's features adhered throughout their form so exactly to the middle line between the beauty of St. John and the ugliness of Judas Iscariot, as represented in a window of the church he attended, that not a single lineament could be selected and called worthy either of distinction or notoriety. The red-jacketed and dark-haired maiden seemed to think so too, for she carelessly glanced over him, and told her man to drive on. She might have looked her thanks to Gabriel on a minute scale,

but she did not speak them; more probably she felt none, for in gaining her a passage he had lost her her point, and we know how women take a favour of that kind.

The gatekeeper surveyed the retreating vehicle.
“That’s a handsome maid,” he said to Oak.

“But she has her faults,” said Gabriel.

“True, farmer.”

“And the greatest of them is—well, what it is always.”

“Beating people down? ay, ‘tis so.”

“Oh no.”

“What, then?”

Gabriel, perhaps a little piqued by the comely traveller’s indifference, glanced back to where he had witnessed her performance over the hedge, and said, “Vanity.”

CHAPTER II.

NIGHT—THE FLOCK—AN INTERIOR—ANOTHER
INTERIOR.

It was nearly midnight on the eve of St. Thomas's, the shortest day in the year. A desolating wind wandered from the north over the hill whereon Oak had watched the yellow waggon and its occupant in the sunshine of a few days earlier.

Norcombe Hill—forming part of Norcombe Ewelease—was one of the spots which suggest to a passer-by that he is in the presence of a shape approaching the indestructible as nearly as any to be found on earth. It was a featureless convexity of chalk and soil—an ordinary specimen of those smoothly outlined protuberances of the globe which may remain undisturbed on some great day of confusion, when far grander heights and dizzy granite precipices topple down.

The hill was covered on its northern side by an ancient and decaying plantation of beeches, whose upper verge formed a line over the crest, fringing

its arched curve against the sky, like a mane. To-night these trees sheltered the southern slope from the keenest blasts, which smote the wood and floundered through it with a sound as of grumbling, or gushed over its crowning boughs in a weakened moan. The dry leaves in the ditch simmered and boiled in the same breezes, a tongue of air occasionally ferreting out a few, and sending them spinning across the grass. A group or two of the latest in date amongst this dead multitude had remained on the twigs which bore them till this very mid-winter time, and in falling rattled against the trunks with smart taps.

Between this half-wooded, half-naked hill, and the vague, still horizon its summit indistinctly commanded, was a mysterious sheet of fathomless shade—the sounds only from which suggested that what it concealed bore some humble resemblance to features here. The thin grasses, more or less coating the hill, were touched by the wind in breezes of differing powers and almost differing natures—one rubbing the blades heavily, another raking them piercingly, another brushing them like a soft broom. The instinctive act of human-kind here was to stand and listen, and learn how the trees on the right and the trees on the left wailed or chaunted to each other in the regular antiphonies of a cathedral choir; how hedges and

other shapes to leeward then caught the note, lowering it to the tenderest sob; and how the hurrying gust then plunged into the south, to be heard no more.

The sky was clear—remarkably clear—and the twinkling of all the stars seemed to be but throbs of one body, timed by a common pulse. The North star was directly in the wind's eye, and since evening the Bear had swung round it outwardly to the east, till it was now at a right angle with the meridian. A difference of colour in the stars—oftener read of than seen in England—was really perceptible here. The kingly brilliancy of Sirius pierced the eye with a steely glitter, the star called Capella was yellow, Aldebaran and Betelgueux shone with a fiery red.

To persons standing alone on a hill during a clear midnight such as this, the roll of the world eastward is almost a palpable movement. The sensation may be caused by the panoramic glide of the stars past earthly objects, which is perceptible in a few minutes of stillness, or by a fancy that the better outlook upon space afforded by a hill emphasizes terrestrial revolution, or by the wind, or by the solitude ; but whatever be its origin, the impression of riding along is vivid and abiding. The poetry of motion is a phrase much in use, and to enjoy the epic form of that gratification it

is necessary to stand on a hill at a small hour of the night, and, first enlarging the consciousness with a sense of difference from the mass of civilized mankind, who are horizontal and disregardful of all such proceedings at this time, long and quietly watch your stately progress through the stars. After such a nocturnal reconnoitre among these astral clusters, aloft from the customary haunts of thought and vision, some men may feel raised to a capability for eternity at once.

Suddenly an unexpected series of sounds began to be heard in this place up against the sky. They had a clearness which was to be found nowhere in the wind, and a sequence which was to be found nowhere in nature. They were the notes of Farmer Oak's flute.

The tune was not floating unhindered into the open air, but it seemed muffled in some way, and was altogether too curtailed in power to spread high or wide. It came from the direction of a small dark object under the plantation hedge—a shepherd's hut—now presenting an outline to which an uninitiated person might have been puzzled to attach either meaning or use.

The image as a whole was that of a small Noah's Ark on a small Ararat, allowing the traditional outlines and general form of the Ark which are followed by toymakers—and by these

means are established in men's imaginations among their firmest, because earliest impressions—to pass as an approximate pattern. The hut stood on small wheels, which raised its floor about a foot from the ground. Such shepherds' huts are dragged into the fields when the lambing season comes on, to shelter the shepherd in his enforced nightly attendance.

It was only latterly that people had begun to call Gabriel "Farmer" Oak. During the twelve-month preceding this time he had been enabled by sustained efforts of industry and chronic good spirits to lease the small sheep-farm of which Norcombe Hill was a portion, and stock it with two hundred sheep. Previously he had been a bailiff for a short time, and earlier still a shepherd only, having from his childhood assisted his father in tending the flocks of large proprietors, till old Gabriel sank to rest.

This venture, unaided and alone, into the paths of farming as master and not as man, with an advance of sheep not yet paid for, was a critical juncture with Gabriel Oak, and he recognized his position clearly. The first movement in his new progress was the lambing of his ewes, and sheep having been his specialty from his youth, he wisely refrained from deputing the task of tending them at this season to a hireling or a novice.

The wind continued to beat about the corners of the hut, but the flute-playing ceased. A rectangular space of light appeared in the side of the hut, and in the opening the outline of Farmer Oak's figure. He carried a lantern in his hand, and closing the door behind him, came forward and busied himself about this nook of the field for nearly twenty minutes, the lantern light appearing and disappearing here and there, and brightening him or darkening him as he stood before or behind it.

Oak's motions, though they had a quiet energy, were slow, and their deliberateness accorded well with his occupation. Fitness being the basis of all beauty, nobody could have denied that his steady swings and turns in and about the flock had elements of grace. Yet, although if occasion demanded he could do or think a thing with as mercurial a dash as can the men of towns who are more to the manner born, his special power, morally, physically, and mentally, was static, owing little or nothing to momentum, as a rule.

A close examination of the ground hereabout, even by the wan starlight only, revealed how a portion of what would have been casually called a wild slope had been appropriated by Farmer Oak for his great purpose this winter. Detached hurdles thatched with straw were stuck into the

ground at various scattered points, amid and under which the whitish forms of his meek ewes moved and rustled. The ring of the sheep-bell, which had been silent during his absence, recommenced, in tones which had more mellowness than clearness, owing to an increasing growth of surrounding wool, and continued till Oak withdrew again from the flock. He returned to the hut, bringing in his arms a new-born lamb, consisting of four legs large enough for a full-grown sheep, united by an unimportant membrane about half the substance of the legs collectively, which constituted the animal's entire body just at present.

The little speck of life he placed on a wisp of hay before the small stove, where a can of milk was simmering. Oak extinguished the lantern by blowing into it and then pinching out the snuff, the cot being lighted by a candle suspended by a twisted wire. A rather hard couch, formed of a few corn sacks thrown carelessly down, covered half the floor of this little habitation, and here the young man stretched himself along, loosened his woollen cravat, and closed his eyes. In about the time a person unaccustomed to bodily labour would have decided upon which side to lie, Farmer Oak was asleep.

The inside of this hut, as it now presented itself, was cosy and alluring, and the scarlet handful of

fire in addition to the candle, reflecting its own genial colour upon whatever it could reach, flung associations of enjoyment even over utensils and tools. In the corner stood the sheep-crook, and along a shelf at one side were ranged bottles and canisters of the simple preparations pertaining to ovine surgery and physic ; spirits of wine, turpentine, tar, magnesia, ginger, and castor-oil being the chief. On a triangular shelf across the corner stood bread, bacon, cheese, and a cup for ale or cider, which was supplied from a flagon beneath. Beside the provisions lay the flute, whose notes had lately been called forth by the lonely watcher to beguile a tedious hour. The house was ventilated by two round holes, like the lights of a cabin, with wood slides.

The lamb, revived by the warmth, began to bleat, and the sound entered Gabriel's ears and brain with an instant meaning, as expected sounds will. Passing from the profoundest sleep to the most alert wakefulness with the same ease that had accompanied the reverse operation, he looked at his watch, found that the hour-hand had shifted again, put on his hat, took the lamb in his arms, and carried it into the darkness. After placing the little creature with its mother, he stood and carefully examined the sky, to ascertain the time of night from the altitudes of the stars.

The Dog-star and Aldebaran pointing to the restless Pleiades were half way up the Southern sky, and between them hung Orion, which gorgeous constellation never burnt more vividly than now, as it swung itself forth above the rim of the landscape. Castor and Pollux with their quiet shine were almost on the meridian: the barren and gloomy Square of Pegasus was creeping round to the north-west; far away through the plantation, Vega sparkled like a lamp suspended amid the leafless trees, and Cassiopeia's chair stood daintily poised on the uppermost boughs.

"One o'clock," said Gabriel.

Being a man not without a frequent consciousness that there was some beauty in this life he led, he stood still after looking at the sky as a useful instrument, and regarded it in an appreciative spirit, as a work of art superlatively beautiful. For a moment he seemed impressed with the speaking loneliness of the scene, or rather with the complete abstraction from all its compass of the sights and sounds of man. Human shapes, interferences, troubles, and joys were all as if they were not, and there seemed to be on the shaded hemisphere of the globe no sentient being save himself; he could fancy them all gone round to the sunny side.

Occupied thus, with eyes stretched afar, Oak

gradually perceived that what he had previously taken to be a star low down behind the outskirts of the plantation was in reality no such thing. It was an artificial light, almost close at hand.

To find themselves utterly alone at night where company is desirable and expected makes some people fearful; but a case more trying by far to the nerves is to discover some mysterious companionship when intuition, sensation, memory, analogy, testimony, probability, induction—every kind of evidence in the logician's list—have united to persuade consciousness that it is quite alone.

Farmer Oak went towards the plantation and pushed through its lower boughs to the windy side. A dim mass under the slope reminded him that a shed occupied a place here, the site being a cutting into the slope of the hill, so that at its back part the roof was almost level with the ground. In front it was formed of boards nailed to posts and covered with tar as a preservative. Through crevices in the roof and side spread streaks and dots of light, a combination of which made up the radiance that had attracted him. Oak stepped up behind, where, leaning down upon the roof and putting his eye close to a hole, he could see into the interior clearly.

The place contained two women and two cows. By the side of the latter a steaming bran-mash

stood in a bucket. One of the women was past middle age. Her companion was apparently young and graceful; he could form no decided opinion upon her looks, her position being almost beneath his eye, so that he saw her in a bird's-eye aërial view, as Milton's Satan first saw Paradise. She wore no bonnet or hat, but had enveloped herself in a large cloak, which was carelessly flung over her head as a covering.

"There, now we'll go home," said the elder of the two, resting her knuckles upon her hips, and looking at their goings-on as a whole. "I do hope Daisy will fetch round again now. I have never been more frightened in my life, but I don't mind breaking my rest if she recovers."

The young woman, whose eyelids were apparently inclined to fall together on the smallest provocation of silence, yawned without parting her lips to any inconvenient extent, whereupon Gabriel caught the infection and slightly yawned in sympathy. "I wish we were rich enough to pay a man to do these things," she said.

"As we are not, we must do them ourselves," said the other; "for you must help me if you stay."

"Well, my hat is gone, however," continued the younger. "It went over the hedge, I think. The idea of such a slight wind catching it."

The cow standing erect was of the Devon breed, and was encased in a tight warm hide of rich Indian red, as absolutely uniform from eyes to tail as if the animal had been dipped in a dye of that colour, her long back being mathematically level. The other was spotted, grey and white. Beside her, Oak now noticed a little calf about a day old, looking idiotically at the two women, which showed that it had not long been accustomed to the phenomenon of eyesight, and often turning to the lantern, which it apparently mistook for the moon, inherited instinct having as yet had little time for correction by experience. Between the sheep and the cows, Lucina had been busy on Norcombe Hill lately.

"I think we had better send for some oatmeal," said the elder woman; "there's no more bran."

"Yes, aunt; and I'll ride over for it as soon as it is light."

"But there's no side-saddle."

"I can ride on the other: trust me."

Oak, upon hearing these remarks, became more curious to observe her features, but this prospect being denied him by the hooding effect of the cloak, and by her forehead coming in the way of what the cloak did not cover, he felt himself drawing upon his fancy for their details. In making even horizontal and clear inspections, we

colour and mould according to the wants within us whatever our eyes bring in. Had Gabriel been able from the first to get a distinct view of her countenance, his estimate of it as very handsome or slightly so would have been as his soul required a divinity at the moment or was ready supplied with one. Having for some time known the want of a satisfactory form to fill an increasing void within him, his position moreover affording the widest scope for his fancy, he painted her a beauty.

By one of those whimsical coincidences in which Nature, like a busy mother, seems to spare a moment from her unremitting labours to turn and make her children smile, the girl now dropped the cloak, and forth tumbled ropes of black hair over a red jacket. Oak knew her instantly as the heroine of the yellow waggon, myrtles, and looking-glass: prosily, as the woman who owed him twopence.

They placed the calf beside its mother again, took up the lantern, and went out, the light sinking down the hill till it was no more than a nebula. Gabriel Oak returned to his flock.

CHAPTER III.

A GIRL ON HORSEBACK—CONVERSATION.

THE sluggish day began to break. Even its position terrestrially is one of the elements of a new interest, and for no particular reason save that the incident of the night had occurred there, Oak went again into the plantation. Lingering and musing here, he heard the steps of a horse at the foot of the hill, and soon there appeared in view an auburn pony with a girl on its back, ascending by the path leading past the cattle-shed. She was the young woman of the night before. Gabriel instantly thought of the hat she had mentioned as having lost in the wind; possibly she had come to look for it. He hastily scanned the ditch, and after walking about ten yards along it, found the hat among the leaves. Gabriel took it in his hand and returned to his hut. Here he ensconced himself, and looked through the loophole in the direction of the rider's approach.

She came up and looked around—then on the

other side of the hedge. Gabriel was about to advance and restore the missing article, when an unexpected performance induced him to suspend the action for the present. The path, after passing the cowshed, bisected the plantation. It was not a bridle-path—merely a pedestrian's track, and the boughs spread horizontally at a height not greater than seven feet above the ground, which made it impossible to ride erect beneath them. The girl, who wore no riding-habit, looked around for a moment, as if to assure herself that all humanity was out of view, then dexterously dropped backwards flat upon the pony's back, her head over its tail, her feet against its shoulder, and her eyes to the sky. The rapidity of her glide into this position was that of a kingfisher—its noiselessness that of a hawk. Gabriel's eyes had scarcely been able to follow her. The tall lank pony seemed used to such phenomena, and ambled along unconcerned. Thus she passed under the level boughs.

The performer seemed quite at home anywhere between a horse's head and its tail, and the necessity for this abnormal attitude having ceased with the passage of the plantation, she began to adopt another, even more obviously convenient than the first. She had no side-saddle, and it was very apparent that a firm seat upon the smooth leather beneath her was unattainable sideways.

Springing to her accustomed perpendicular like a bowed sapling, and satisfying herself that nobody was in sight, she seated herself in the manner demanded by the saddle, though hardly expected of the woman, and trotted off in the direction of Tew nell Mill.

Oak was amused, perhaps a little astonished, and hanging up the hat in his hut, went again among his ewes. An hour passed, the girl returned, properly seated now, with a bag of bran in front of her. On nearing the cattle-shed she was met by a boy bringing a milking-pail, who held the reins of the pony whilst she slid off. The boy led away the horse, leaving the pail with the young woman.

Soon a soft spirit, alternating with a loud spirit, came in regular succession from within the shed. They were the sounds of a person milking a cow. Gabriel took the lost hat in his hand, and waited beside the path she would follow in leaving the hill.

She came, the pail in one hand, hanging against her knee. The left arm was extended as a balance, enough of it being shown bare to make Oak wish that the event had happened in summer, when the whole would have been revealed. There was a bright air and manner about her now, by which she seemed to imply that the desirability of her

existence could not be questioned ; and this rather saucy assumption failed in being offensive, because a beholder felt it to be, upon the whole, true. Like exceptional emphasis in the tone of a genius, that which would have made mediocrity ridiculous was an addition to recognized power. It was with some surprise that she saw Gabriel's face rising like the moon behind the hedge.

The adjustment of the farmer's hazy conceptions of her charms to the portrait of herself she now presented him with was less a diminution than a difference. The starting-point selected by the judgment was her height. She seemed tall, but the pail was a small one, and the hedge diminutive ; hence, making allowance for error by comparison with these, she could have been not above the height to be chosen by women as best. All features of consequence were severe and regular. It may have been observed by persons who go about the shires with eyes for beauty, that in Englishwomen a classically formed face is seldom found to be united with a figure of the same pattern, the highly-finished features being generally too large for the remainder of the frame ; that a graceful and proportionate figure of eight heads usually goes off into random facial curves. Without throwing a Nymphean tissue over a milkmaid, let it be said that here criticism checked itself

in examining details to return to where it began, and looked at her proportions with a long consciousness of pleasure. From the contours of her figure in its upper part, she must have had a beautiful neck and shoulders ; but it may be stated that since her infancy nobody had ever seen them. Had she been put into a low dress she would have run and thrust her head into a bush. Yet she was not a shy girl by any means ; it was merely her instinct to draw the line dividing the seen from the unseen higher than they do it in towns.

That the girl's thoughts hovered about her face and form as soon as she caught Oak's eyes conning the same page was natural, and almost certain. The self-consciousness shown would have been vanity if a little more pronounced, dignity if a little less. Rays of male vision seem to have a tickling effect upon virgin faces in rural districts ; she hastily brushed hers with her hand, as if Gabriel had been irritating its pink surface with a straw, and the free air of her previous movements was reduced at the same time to a chastened phase of itself. Yet it was the man who blushed, the maid not at all.

“ I found a hat,” said Oak.

“ It is mine,” said she, and, from a sense of proportion, kept down to a small smile an inclination to laugh distinctly : “ it flew away last night.”

"One o'clock this morning?"

"Well—it was." She was surprised. "How did you know?" she said.

"I was here."

"You are Farmer Oak, are you not?"

"That or thereabouts. I'm lately come to this place."

"A large farm?" she inquired, casting her eyes round, and swinging back her hair, which was black in the shaded hollows of its mass; but it being now an hour past sunrise, the rays touched its prominent curves with a colour of their own.

"No; not large. About a hundred." (In speaking of farms the word "acres" is omitted by the natives, by analogy to such old expressions as "a stag of ten.")

"I wanted my hat this morning," she went on.
"I had to ride to Tewnell Mill."

"Yes, you had."

"How do you know?"

"I saw you."

"Where?" she inquired, a misgiving bringing every muscle of her lineaments and frame to a standstill.

"Here—going through the plantation, and all down the hill," said Farmer Oak, with an aspect excessively knowing with regard to some matter in his mind, as he gazed at a remote point in the

direction named, and then turned back to meet his colloquist's eyes.

A perception caused him to withdraw his own from hers as suddenly as if he had been caught in a theft. Recollection of the strange antics she had indulged in when passing through the trees, was succeeded in the girl by a nettled palpitation, and that by a hot face. It was a time to see a woman redden who was not given to reddening as a rule ; not a point in the milkmaid but was of the deepest rose-colour. From the Maiden's Blush, through all varieties of the Provence down to the Crimson Tuscany, the countenance of Oak's acquaintance quickly graduated ; whereupon he, in considerateness, had turned away his head.

The sympathetic man still looked the other way, and wondered when she would recover whiteness sufficient to justify him in facing her again. He heard what seemed to be the flitting of a dead leaf upon the breeze, and looked. She had gone away.

With an air between that of Tragedy and Comedy, Gabriel returned to his work.

Five mornings and evenings passed. The young woman came regularly to milk the healthy cow or to attend to the sick one, but never allowed her vision to stray in the direction of Oak's person. His want of tact had deeply offended her

—not by seeing what he could not help, but by letting her know that he had seen it. For, as without law there is no sin, without eyes there is no indecorum; and she appeared to feel that Gabriel's espial had made her an indecorous woman without her own connivance. It was food for great regret with him; it was also a *contretemps* which touched into life a latent heat he had experienced in that direction.

The acquaintanceship might, however, have ended in a slow forgetting, but for an incident which occurred at the end of the same week. One afternoon it began to freeze, and the frost increased with evening, which drew on like a stealthy tightening of bonds. It was a time when in cottages the breath of the sleepers freezes to the sheets, when round the drawing-room fire of a thick-walled mansion the sitters' backs are cold, even whilst their faces are all aglow. Many a small bird went to bed supperless that night among the bare boughs.

As the milking-hour drew near, Oak kept his usual watch upon the cowshed. At last he felt cold, and shaking an extra quantity of bedding round the yearning ewes, he entered the hut and heaped more fuel upon the stove. The wind came in at the bottom of the door, to prevent which Oak wheeled the cot round a little more to the

south. Then the wind spouted in at a ventilating hole—of which there was one on each side of the hut.

Gabriel had always known that when the fire was lighted and the door closed one of these must be kept open—that chosen being always on the side away from the wind. Closing the slide to windward, he turned to open the other; on second thoughts, the farmer considered he would first sit down, leaving both closed for a minute or two, till the temperature of the hut was a little raised. He sat down.

His head began to ache in an unwonted manner, and, fancying himself weary by reason of the broken rests of the preceding nights, Oak decided to get up, open the slide, and then allow himself to fall asleep. He fell asleep without having performed the necessary preliminary.

How long he remained unconscious Gabriel never knew. During the first stages of his return to perception peculiar deeds seemed to be in course of enactment. His dog was howling, his head was aching fearfully—somebody was pulling him about, hands were loosening his neckerchief.

On opening his eyes, he found that evening had sunk to dusk, in a strange manner of unexpectedness. The young girl with the remarkably pleasant lips and white teeth was beside him. More

HANDS WERE LOOSENING HIS NECKERCHIEF.

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than this—astonishingly more—his head was upon her lap, his face and neck were disagreeably wet, and her fingers were unbuttoning his collar.

“Whatever is the matter?” said Oak, vacantly.

She seemed to experience a sensation of mirth, but of too insignificant a kind to start the capacity of enjoyment.

“Nothing now,” she answered, “since you are not dead. It was a wonder you were not suffocated in this hut of yours.”

“Ah, the hut!” murmured Gabriel. “I gave ten pounds for that hut. But I’ll sell it, and sit under thatched hurdles as they did in old times, and curl up to sleep in a lock of straw! It played me nearly the same trick the other day!” Gabriel, by way of emphasis, brought down his fist upon the floor.

“It was not exactly the fault of the hut,” she observed, speaking in a tone which showed her to be that novelty among women—one who finished a thought before beginning the sentence which was to convey it. “You should, I think, have considered, and not have been so foolish as to leave the slides closed.”

“Yes, I suppose I should,” said Oak, absently. He was endeavouring to catch and appreciate the sensation of being thus with her—his head upon

her dress—before the event passed on into the heap of bygone things. He wished she knew his impressions; but he would as soon have thought of carrying an odour in a net as of attempting to convey the intangibilities of his feeling in the coarse meshes of language. So he remained silent.

She made him sit up, and then Oak began wiping his face and shaking himself like a Samson. “How can I thank ye?” he said at last, gratefully, some of the natural rusty red having returned to his face.

“Oh, never mind that,” said the girl, smiling, and allowing her smile to hold good for Gabriel’s next remark, whatever that might prove to be.

“How did you find me?”

“I heard your dog howling and scratching at the door of the hut when I came to the milking (it was so lucky, Daisy’s milking is almost over for the season, and I shall not come here after this week or the next). The dog saw me, and jumped over to me, and laid hold of my dress. I came across and looked round the hut the very first thing to see if the slides were closed. My uncle has a hut like this one, and I have heard him tell his shepherd not to go to sleep without leaving a slide open. I opened the door, and there you were like dead. I threw the milk over you, as

there was no water, forgetting it was warm, and no use."

"I wonder if I should have died?" Gabriel said, in a low voice, which was rather meant to travel back to himself than on to her.

"Oh no," the girl replied. She seemed to prefer a less tragic probability; to have saved a man from death involved talk that should harmonize with the dignity of such a deed—and she shunned it.

"I believe you saved my life, Miss—— I don't know your name. I know your aunt's, but not yours."

"I would just as soon not tell it—rather not. There is no reason either why I should, as you probably will never have much to do with me."

"Still, I should like to know."

"You can inquire at my aunt's—she will tell you."

"My name is Gabriel Oak."

"And mine isn't. You seem fond of yours in speaking it so decisively, Gabriel Oak."

"You see, it is the only one I shall ever have, and I must make the most of it."

"I always think mine sounds odd and disagreeable."

"I should think you might soon get a new one."

"Mercy!—how many opinions you keep about you concerning other people, Gabriel Oak."

"Well, Miss—excuse the words—I thought you would like them. But I can't match you, I know, in mapping out my mind upon my tongue, as I may say. I never was very clever in my inside. But I thank you. Come, give me your hand!"

She hesitated, somewhat disconcerted at Oak's old-fashioned earnest conclusion to a dialogue lightly carried on. "Very well," she said, and gave him her hand, compressing her lips to a demure impassivity. He held it but an instant, and in his fear of being too demonstrative, swerved to the opposite extreme, touching her fingers with the lightness of a small-hearted person.

"I am sorry," he said, the instant after, regretfully.

"What for?"

"Letting your hand go so quickly."

"You may have me again if you like; there it is." She gave him her hand again.

Oak held it longer this time—indeed, curiously long. "How soft it is—being winter time, too—not chapped or rough, or anything!" he said.

"There—that's long enough," said she, though without pulling it away. "But I suppose you are thinking you would like to kiss it? You may if you want to."

"I wasn't thinking of any such thing," said Gabriel, simply; "but I will——"

"That you wont!" She snatched back her hand.

Gabriel felt himself guilty of another want of tact.

"Now find out my name," she said, teasingly; and withdrew.

CHAPTER IV.

GABRIEL'S RESOLVE—THE VISIT—THE MISTAKE.

THE only superiority in women that is tolerable to the rival sex is, as a rule, that of the unconscious kind, but a superiority which recognizes itself may sometimes please by suggesting at the same time possibilities of impropriation to the subordinated man.

This well-favoured and comely girl soon made appreciable inroads upon the emotional constitution of young Farmer Oak.

Love, being an extremely exacting usurer (a sense of exorbitant profit, spiritually, by an exchange of hearts, being at the bottom of pure passions, as that of exorbitant profit, bodily or materially, is at the bottom of those of lower atmosphere), every morning his feelings were as sensitive as the money-market in calculations upon his chances. His dog waited for his meals in a way so like that in which Oak waited for the girl's presence, that the farmer was quite struck

with the resemblance, felt it lowering, and would not look at the dog. However, he continued to watch through the hedge at her regular coming, and thus his sentiments towards her were deepened without any corresponding effect being produced upon herself. Oak had nothing finished and ready to say as yet, and not being able to frame love-phrases which end where they begin ; passionate tales—

—Full of sound and fury
Signifying nothing—

he said no word at all.

By making inquiries he found that the girl's name was Bathsheba Everdene, and that the cow would go dry in about seven days. He dreaded the eighth day.

At last the eighth day came. The cow had ceased to give milk for that year, and Bathsheba Everdene came up the hill no more. Gabriel had reached a pitch of existence he never could have anticipated a short time before. He liked saying "Bathsheba" as a private enjoyment instead of whistling ; turned over his taste to black hair, though he had sworn by brown ever since he was a boy, isolated himself till the space he filled in the public eye was contemptibly small. Love is a possible strength in an actual weakness. Marriage transforms a distraction into a support,

the power of which should be, and happily often is, in direct proportion to the degree of imbecility it supplants. Oak began now to see light in this direction, and said to himself, “I’ll make her my wife, or upon my soul I shall be good for nothing!”

All this while he was perplexing himself about an errand on which he might consistently visit the cottage of Bathsheba’s aunt.

He found his opportunity in the death of a ewe, mother of a living lamb. On a day which had a summer face and a winter constitution—a fine January morning, when there was just enough blue sky visible to make cheerfully disposed people wish for more, and an occasional sunshiny gleam of silvery whiteness, Oak put the lamb into a respectable Sunday basket, and stalked across the fields to the house of Mrs. Hurst, the aunt—George, the dog, walking behind, with a countenance of great concern at the serious turn pastoral affairs seemed to be taking.

Gabriel had watched the blue wood-smoke curling from the chimney with strange meditation. At evening he had fancifully traced it down the chimney to the spot of its origin—seen the hearth and Bathsheba beside it—beside it in her out-door dress; for the clothes she had worn on the hill were by association equally with her person included in the compass of his affection; they

seemed at this early time of his love a necessary ingredient of the sweet mixture called Bathsheba Everdene.

He had made a toilet of a nicely adjusted kind—of a nature between the carefully neat and the carelessly ornate—of a degree between fine-market-day and wet-Sunday selection. He thoroughly cleaned his silver watch-chain with whiting, put new lacing straps to his boots, looked to the brass eyelet-holes, went to the inmost heart of the plantation for a new walking-stick, and trimmed it vigorously on his way back; took a new hand-kerchief from the bottom of his clothes-box, put on the light waistcoat patterned all over with sprigs of an elegant flower uniting the beauties of both rose and lily without the defects of either, and used all the hair-oil he possessed upon his usually dry, sandy and inextricably curly hair, till he had deepened it to a splendidly novel colour, between that of guano and Roman cement, making it stick to his head like mace round a nutmeg, or wet seaweed round a boulder after the ebb.

Nothing disturbed the stillness of the cottage save the chatter of a knot of sparrows on the eaves; one might fancy scandal and *tracasseries* to be no less the staple subject of these little coteries on roofs than of those under them. It seemed that the omen was an unpropitious one,

for, as the rather untoward commencement of Oak's overtures, just as he arrived by the garden gate he saw a cat inside, going into various arched shapes and fiendish convulsions at the sight of his dog George. The dog took no notice, for he had arrived at an age at which all superfluous barking was cynically avoided as a waste of breath —in fact he never barked even at the sheep except to order, when it was done with an absolutely neutral countenance, as a liturgical form of Combination-service, which, though offensive, had to be gone through once now and then just to frighten the flock for their own good.

A voice came from behind some laurel-bushes into which the cat had run :

“Poor dear! Did a nasty brute of a dog want to kill it!—did he, poor dear!”

“I beg yer pardon,” said Oak to the voice, “but George was walking on behind me with a temper as mild as milk.”

Almost before he had ceased speaking, Oak was seized with a misgiving as to whose ear was the recipient of his answer. Nobody appeared, and he heard the person retreat among the bushes.

Gabriel meditated, and so deeply that he brought small furrows into his forehead by sheer force of reverie. Where the issue of an interview is as likely to be a vast change for the worse as for

the better, any initial difference from expectation causes nipping sensations of failure. Oak went up to the door a little abashed: his mental rehearsal and the reality had had no common grounds of opening.

Bathsheba's aunt was indoors. "Will you tell Miss Everdene that somebody would be glad to speak to her?" said Mr. Oak. (Calling yourself merely Somebody, and not giving a name, is not by any means to be taken as an example of the ill-breeding of the rural world: it springs from a refined sense of modesty, of which townspeople, with their cards and announcements, have no notion whatever.)

Bathsheba was out. The voice had evidently been hers.

"Will you come in, Mr. Oak?"

"Oh, thank ye," said Gabriel, following her to the fireplace. "I've brought a lamb for Miss Everdene. I thought she might like one to rear: girls do."

"She might," said Mrs. Hurst, musingly; "though she's only a visitor here. If you will wait a minute, Bathsheba will be in."

"Yes, I will wait," said Gabriel, sitting down. "The lamb isn't really the business I came about, Mrs. Hurst. In short, I was going to ask her if she'd like to be married."

"And were you indeed?"

"Yes. Because if she would, I should be very glad to marry her. D'ye know if she's got any other young man hanging about her at all?"

"Let me think," said Mrs. Hurst, poking the fire superfluously. . . . "Yes—bless you, ever so many young men. You see, Farmer Oak, she's so good-looking, and an excellent scholar besides—she was going to be a governess once, you know, only she was too wild. Not that her young men ever come here—but, Lord, in the nature of women, she must have a dozen!"

"That's unfortunate," said Farmer Oak, contemplating a crack in the stone floor with sorrow. "I'm only an every-day sort of man, and my only chance was in being the first comer. . . . Well, there's no use in my waiting, for that was all I came about: so I'll take myself off home-along, Mrs. Hurst."

When Gabriel had gone about two hundred yards along the down, he heard a "hoi-hoi!" uttered behind him, in a piping note of more treble quality than that in which the exclamation usually embodies itself when shouted across a field. He looked round, and saw a girl racing after him, waving a white handkerchief.

Oak stood still—and the runner drew nearer. It was Bathsheba Everdene. Gabriel's colour

deepened : hers was already deep, not, as it appeared, from emotion, but from running.

" Farmer Oak—I—" she said, pausing for want of breath, pulling up in front of him with a slanted face, and putting her hand to her side.

" I have just called to see you," said Gabriel, pending her further speech.

" Yes—I know that," she said, panting like a robin, her face red and moist from her exertions, like a peony petal before the sun dries off the dew. " I didn't know you had come (pant) to ask to have me, or I should have come in from the garden instantly. I ran after you to say (pant) that my aunt made a mistake in sending you away from courting me (pant)—"

Gabriel expanded. " I'm sorry to have made you run so fast, my dear," he said, with a grateful sense of favours to come. " Wait a bit till you've found your breath."

" —It was quite a mistake—aunt's telling you I had a young man already," Bathsheba went on. " I haven't a sweetheart at all (pant), and I never had one, and I thought that, as times go with women, it was *such* a pity to send you away thinking that I had several."

" Really and truly I am glad to hear that!" said Farmer Oak, smiling one of his long special smiles, and blushing with gladness. He held out

his hand to take hers, which, when she had eased her side by pressing it there, was prettily extended upon her bosom to still her loud-beating heart. Directly he seized it she put it behind her, so that it slipped through his fingers like an eel.

"I have a nice snug little farm," said Gabriel, with half a degree less assurance than when he had seized her hand.

"Yes; you have."

"A man has advanced me money to begin with, but still, it will soon be paid off, and, though I am only an every-day sort of man, I have got on a little since I was a boy." Gabriel uttered "a little" in a tone to show her that it was the complacent form of "a great deal." He continued: "When we are married, I am quite sure I can work twice as hard as I do now."

He went forward and stretched out his arm again. Bathsheba had overtaken him at a point beside which stood a low, stunted holly-bush, now laden with red berries. Seeing his advance take the form of an attitude threatening a possible enclosure, if not compression, of her person she edged off round the bush.

"Why, Farmer Oak," she said, over the top, looking at him with rounded eyes, "I never said I was going to marry you."

"Well—that is a tale!" said Oak, with dismay.

"To run after anybody like this, and then say you don't want me!"

"What I meant to tell you was only this," she said eagerly, and yet half conscious of the absurdity of the position she had made for herself; "that nobody has got me yet as a sweetheart, instead of my having a dozen, as my aunt said; I hate to be thought men's property in that way, though possibly I shall be to be had some day. Why, if I'd wanted you I shouldn't have run after you like this; 'twould have been the *forwardest* thing! But there was no harm in hurrying to correct a piece of false news that had been told you."

"Oh no—no harm at all." But there is such a thing as being too generous in expressing a judgment impulsively, and Oak added with a more appreciative sense of all the circumstances—"Well, I am not quite certain it was no harm."

"Indeed, I hadn't time to think before starting whether I wanted to marry or not, for you'd have been gone over the hill."

"Come," said Gabriel, freshening again; "think a minute or two. I'll wait awhile, Miss Everdene. Will you marry me? Do, Bathsheba. I love you far more than common!"

"I'll try to think," she observed, rather more timorously; "if I can think out of doors; but my mind spreads away so."

"But you can give a guess."

"Then give me time." Bathsheba looked thoughtfully into the distance, away from the direction in which Gabriel stood.

"I can make you happy," said he to the back of her head, across the bush. "You shall have a piano in a year or two—farmers' wives are getting to have pianos now—and I'll practise up the flute right well to play with you in the evenings."

"Yes; I should like that."

"And have one of those little ten-pound gigs for market—and nice flowers, and birds—cocks and hens I mean, because they are useful," continued Gabriel, feeling balanced between prose and verse.

"I should like it very much."

"And a frame for cucumbers—like a gentleman and lady."

"Yes."

"And when the wedding was over, we'd have it put in the newspaper list of marriages."

"Dearly I should like that."

"And the babies in the births—every man jack of 'em! And at home by the fire, whenever you look up, there I shall be—and whenever I look up, there will be you."

"Wait, wait, and don't be improper!"

Her countenance fell, and she was silent awhile. He contemplated the red berries between them

over and over again, to such an extent, that holly seemed in his after-life to be a cypher signifying a proposal of marriage. Bathsheba decisively turned to him.

"No; 'tis no use," she said. "I don't want to marry you."

"Try."

"I have tried hard all the time I've been thinking; for a marriage would be very nice in one sense. People would talk about me, and think I had won my battle, and I should feel triumphant, and all that. But a husband——"

"Well!"

"Why, he'd always be there, as you say; whenever I looked up, there he'd be."

"Of course he would—I, that is."

"Well, what I mean is that I shouldn't mind being a bride at a wedding, if I could be one without having a husband. But since a woman can't show off in that way by herself, I shan't marry—at least yet."

"That's a terrible wooden story."

At this elegant criticism of her statement, Bathsheba made an addition to her dignity by a slight sweep away from him.

"Upon my heart and soul, I don't know what a maid can say stupider than that," said Oak. "But, dearest," he continued in a palliative voice,

"don't be like it!" Oak sighed a deep honest sigh—none the less so in that, being like the sigh of a pine plantation, it was rather noticeable as a disturbance of the atmosphere. "Why won't you have me?" he said appealingly, creeping round the holly to reach her side.

"I cannot," she said, retreating.

"But why?" he persisted, standing still at last in despair of ever reaching her, and facing over the bush.

"Because I don't love you."

"Yes, but——"

She contracted a yawn to an inoffensive smallness, so that it was hardly ill-mannered at all. "I don't love you," she said.

"But I love you—and, as for myself, I am content to be liked."

"Oh, Mr. Oak—that's very fine! You'd get to despise me."

"Never," said Mr. Oak, so earnestly that he seemed to be coming, by the force of his words, straight through the bush and into her arms. "I shall do one thing in this life—one thing certain—that is, love you, and long for you, and *keep wanting you till I die.*" His voice had a genuine pathos now, and his large brown hands perceptibly trembled.

"It seems dreadfully wrong not to have you

when you feel so much," she said with a little distress, and looking hopelessly around for some means of escape from her moral dilemma. "How I wish I hadn't run after you!" However, she seemed to have a short cut for getting back to cheerfulness, and set her face to signify archness. "It wouldn't do, Mr. Oak. I want somebody to tame me; I am too independent; and you would never be able to, I know."

Oak cast his eyes down the field in a way implying that it was useless to attempt argument.

"Mr. Oak," she said, with luminous distinctness and common sense, "you are better off than I. I have hardly a penny in the world—I am staying with my aunt for my bare sustenance. I am better educated than you—and I don't love you a bit: that's my side of the case. Now yours: you are a farmer just beginning, and you ought in common prudence, if you marry at all (which you should certainly not think of doing at present) to marry a woman with money, who would stock a larger farm for you than you have now."

Gabriel looked at her with a little surprise and much admiration.

"That's the very thing I had been thinking myself!" he naïvely said.

Farmer Oak had one-and-a-half Christian characteristics too many to succeed with Bathsheba:

his humility, and a superfluous moiety of honesty. Bathsheba was decidedly disconcerted.

"Well, then, why did you come and disturb me?" she said, almost angrily, if not quite, an enlarging red spot rising in each cheek.

"I can't do what I think would be—would be——"

"Right?"

"No: wise."

"You have made an admission *now*, Mr. Oak," she exclaimed, with even more hauteur, and rocking her head disdainfully. "After that, do you think I could marry you? Not if I know it."

He broke in, passionately: "But don't mistake me like that. Because I am open enough to own what every man in my position would have thought of, you make your colours come up your face, and get crabbed with me. That about your not being good enough for me is nonsense. You speak like a lady—all the parish notice it, and your uncle at Weatherbury is, I have heard, a large farmer—much larger than ever I shall be. May I call in the evening, or will you walk along with me on Sundays? I don't want you to make up your mind at once, if you'd rather not."

"No—no—I cannot. Don't press me any more—don't. I don't love you—so 'twould be ridiculous!" she said, with a laugh.

No man likes to see his emotions the sport of a merry-go-round of skittishness. "Very well," said Oak, firmly, with the bearing of one who was going to give his days and nights to Ecclesiastes for ever. "Then I'll ask you no more."

CHAPTER V.

DEPARTURE OF BATHSHEBA—A PASTORAL TRAGEDY.

THE news which one day reached Gabriel, that Bathsheba Everdene had left the neighbourhood, had an influence upon him which might have surprised any who never suspected that the more emphatic the renunciation the less absolute its character.

It may have been observed that there is no regular path for getting out of love as there is for getting in. Some people look upon marriage as a short cut that way, but it has been known to fail. Separation, which was the means that chance offered to Gabriel Oak by Bathsheba's disappearance, though effectual with people of certain humours, is apt to idealize the removed object with others—notably those whose affection, placid and regular as it may be, flows deep and long. Oak belonged to the even-tempered order of humanity, and felt the secret fusion of himself in Bathsheba to be burning with a finer flame now that she was gone—that was all.

His incipient friendship with her aunt had been nipped by the failure of his suit, and all that Oak learnt of Bathsheba's movements was done indirectly. It appeared that she had gone to a place called Weatherbury, more than twenty miles off, but in what capacity—whether as a visitor, or permanently, he could not discover.

Gabriel had two dogs. George, the elder, exhibited an ebony-tipped nose, surrounded by a narrow margin of pink flesh, and a coat marked in random splotches approximating in colour to white and slaty grey, but the grey, after years of sun and rain, had been scorched and washed out of the more prominent locks, leaving them of a reddish-brown, as if the blue component of the grey had faded, like the indigo from the same kind of colour in Turner's pictures. In substance, it had originally been hair, but long contact with sheep seemed to be turning it by degrees into wool of a poor quality and staple.

This dog had originally belonged to a shepherd of inferior morals and dreadful temper, and the result was that George knew the exact degree of condemnation signified by cursing and swearing of all descriptions better than the wickedest old man in the neighbourhood. Long experience had so precisely taught the animal the difference between such exclamations as "Come in!" and

"D— ye, come in!" that he knew to a hair's breadth the rate of trotting back from the ewes' tails that each c'd involved, if a staggerer with the sheep-croo' as to be escaped. Though old, he was clever and trustworthy still.

The young dog, George's son, might possibly have been the image of his mother, for there was not much resemblance between him and George. He was learning the sheep-keeping business, so as to follow on at the flock when the other should die, but had got no further than the rudiments as yet—still finding an insuperable difficulty in distinguishing between doing a thing well enough and doing it too well. So earnest and yet so wrong-headed was this young dog (he had no name in particular, and answered with perfect readiness to any pleasant interjection), that if sent behind the flock to help them on, he did it so thoroughly that he would have chased them across the whole county with the greatest pleasure if not called off, or reminded when to stop by the example of old George.

Thus much for the dogs. On the further side of Norcombe Hill was a chalk-pit, from which chalk had been drawn for generations, and spread over adjacent farms. Two hedges converged upon it in the form of a V, but without quite meeting. The narrow opening left, which was immediately over

the brow of the pit, was protected by a rough railing.

One night, when Farmer Oak had returned to his house, believing there would be no further necessity for his attendance on the down, he called as usual to the dogs, previously to shutting them up in the outhouse till next morning. Only one responded—old George; the other could not be found, either in the house, lane, or garden. Gabriel then remembered that he had left the two dogs on the hill eating a dead lamb (a kind of meat he usually kept from them, except when other food ran short), and concluding that the young one had not finished his meal, he went indoors to the luxury of a bed, which latterly he had only enjoyed on Sundays.

It was a still, moist night. Just before dawn he was assisted in waking by the abnormal reverberation of familiar music. To the shepherd, the note of the sheep-bell, like the ticking of the clock to other people, is a chronic sound that only makes itself noticed by ceasing or altering in some unusual manner from the well-known idle tinkle which signifies to the accustomed ear, however distant, that all is well in the fold. In the solemn calm of the awakening morn that note was heard by Gabriel, beating with unusual violence and rapidity. This exceptional ringing may be

caused in two ways—by the rapid feeding of the sheep bearing the bell, as when the flock breaks into new pasture, which gives it an intermittent rapidity, or by the sheep starting off in a run, when the sound has a regular palpitation. The experienced ear of Oak knew the sound he now heard to be caused by the running of the flock with great velocity.

He jumped out of bed, dressed, tore down the lane through a foggy dawn, and ascended the hill. The forward ewes were kept apart from those among which the fall of lambs would be later, there being two hundred of the latter class in Gabriel's flock. These two hundred seemed to have absolutely vanished from the hill. There were the fifty with their lambs, enclosed at the other end as he had left them, but the rest, forming the bulk of the flock, were nowhere. Gabriel called at the top of his voice the shepherd's call.

“Ovey, ovey, ovey!”

Not a single bleat. He went to the hedge—a gap had been broken through it, and in the gap were the footprints of the sheep. Rather surprised to find them break fence at this season, yet putting it down instantly to their great fondness for ivy in winter-time, of which a great deal grew in the plantation, he followed through the hedge. They were not in the plantation. He

called again: the valleys and furthest hills resounded as when the sailors invoked the lost Hylas on the Mysian shore; but no sheep. He passed through the trees and along the ridge of the hill. On the extreme sumit, where the ends of the two converging hedges of which we have spoken were stopped short by meeting the brow of the chalk-pit, he saw the younger dog standing against the sky—dark and motionless as Napoleon at St. Helena.

A horrible conviction darted through Oak. With a sensation of bodily faintness he advanced: at one point the rails were broken through, and there he saw the footprints of his ewes. The dog came up, licked his hand, and made signs implying that he expected some great reward for signal services rendered. Oak looked over the precipice. The ewes lay dead and dying at its foot—a heap of two hundred mangled carcases, representing in their condition just now at least two hundred more.

Oak was an intensely humane man: indeed, his humanity often tore in pieces any politic intentions of his bordering on strategy, and carried him on as by gravitation. A shadow in his life had always been that his flock ended in mutton—that a day came and found every shepherd an arrant traitor to his defenceless sheep. His first feeling now was one of pity for the untimely fate of these gentle ewes and their unborn lambs.

It was a second to remember another phase of the matter. The sheep were not insured. All the savings of a frugal life had been dispersed at a blow ; his hopes of being an independent farmer were laid low—possibly for ever. Gabriel's energies, patience, and industry had been so severely taxed during the years of his life between eighteen and eight-and-twenty, to reach his present stage of progress, that no more seemed to be left in him. He leant down upon a rail, and covered his face with his hands.

Stupors, however, do not last for ever, and Farmer Oak recovered from his. It was as remarkable as it was characteristic that the one sentence he uttered was in thankfulness :—

“Thank God I am not married : what would *she* have done in the poverty now coming upon me !”

Oak raised his head, and wondering what he could do, listlessly surveyed the scene. By the outer margin of the pit was an oval pond, and over it hung the attenuated skeleton of a chrome-yellow moon, which had only a few days to last—the morning star dogging her on the right hand. The pool glittered like a dead man’s eye, and as the world awoke a breeze blew, shaking and elongating the reflection of the moon without breaking it, and turning the image of the star to a phosphoric streak upon the water. All this Oak saw and remembered.

As far as could be learnt it appeared that the poor young dog, still under the impression that since he was kept for running after sheep, the more he ran after them the better, had at the end of his meal off the dead lamb, which may have given him additional energy and spirits, collected all the ewes into a corner, driven the timid creatures through the hedge, across the upper field, and by main force of worrying had given them momentum enough to break down a portion of the rotten railing, and so hurled them over the edge.

George's son had done his work so thoroughly that he was considered too good a workman to live, and was, in fact, taken and tragically shot at twelve o'clock that same day—another instance of the untoward fate which so often attends dogs and other philosophers who follow out a train of reasoning to its logical conclusion, and attempt perfectly consistent conduct in a world made up so largely of compromise.

Gabriel's farm had been stocked by a dealer—on the strength of Oak's promising look and character—who was receiving a per-centa^{ge} from the farmer till such time as the advance should be cleared off. Oak found that the value of stock, plant, and implements which were really his own would be about sufficient to pay his debts, leaving himself a free man with the clothes he stood up in, and nothing more.

CHAPTER VI.

THE FAIR—THE JOURNEY—THE FIRE.

Two months passed away. We are brought on to a day in February, on which was held the yearly statute or hiring fair in the town of Casterbridge.

At one end of the street stood from two to three hundred blithe and hearty labourers waiting upon Chance—all men of the stamp to whom labour suggests nothing worse than a wrestle with gravitation, and pleasure nothing better than a renunciation of the same. Among these, carters and waggoneers were distinguished by having a piece of whip-cord twisted round their hats; thatchers wore a fragment of woven straw; shepherds held their sheep-crooks in their hands; and thus the situation required was known to the hirers at a glance.

In the crowd was an athletic young fellow of somewhat superior appearance to the rest—in fact, his superiority was marked enough to lead several ruddy peasants standing by to speak to him inquiringly, as to a farmer, and to use “Sir” as a terminational word. His answer always was,—

"I am looking for a place myself—a bailiff's. Do you know of anybody who wants one?"

Gabriel was paler now. His eyes were more meditative, and his expression was more sad. He had passed through an ordeal of wretchedness which had given him more than it had taken away. He had sunk from his modest elevation as pastoral king into the very slime-pits of Siddim; but there was left to him a dignified calm he had never before known, and that indifference to fate which, though it often makes a villain of a man, is the basis of his sublimity when it does not. And thus the abasement had been exaltation, and the loss gain.

In the morning a regiment of cavalry had left the town, and a sergeant and his party had been beating up for recruits through the four streets. As the end of the day drew on, and he found himself not hired, Gabriel almost wished that he had joined them, and gone off to serve his country. Weary of standing in the market-place, and not much minding the kind of work he turned his hand to, he decided to offer himself in some other capacity than that of bailiff.

All the farmers seemed to be wanting shepherds. Sheep-tending was Gabriel's specialty. Turning down an obscure street and entering an obscurer lane, he went up to a smith's shop.

“How long would it take you to make a shepherd’s crook ? ”

“Twenty minutes.”

“How much ? ”

“Two shillings.”

He sat on a bench and the crook was made, a stem being given him into the bargain.

He then went to a ready-made clothes’ shop, the owner of which had a large rural connection. As the crook had absorbed most of Gabriel’s money, he attempted, and carried out, an exchange of his overcoat for a shepherd’s regulation smock-frock.

This transaction having been completed, he again hurried off to the centre of the town, and stood on the kerb of the pavement, as a shepherd, crook in hand.

Now that Oak had turned himself into a shepherd, it seemed that bailiffs were most in demand. However, two or three farmers noticed him and drew near. Dialogues followed, more or less in the subjoined form :—

“Where do you come from ? ”

“Norcombe.”

“That’s a long way.”

“Twenty miles.”

“Whose farm were you upon last ? ”

“My own.”

This reply invariably operated like a rumour of

cholera. The inquiring farmer would edge away and shake his head dubiously. Gabriel, like his dog, was too good to be trustworthy, and he never made any advance beyond this point.

It is better to accept any chance that offers itself, and then extemporize a procedure to fit it, than to get a good plan matured, and wait for a chance of using it. Gabriel wished he had not nailed up his colours as a shepherd, but had instead laid himself out for anything in the whole cycle of labour that was required in the fair. It grew dusk. Some merry men were whistling and singing by the corn-exchange. Gabriel's hand, which had lain for some time idle in his smock-frock pocket, touched his flute, which he carried there. Here was an opportunity for putting his dearly bought wisdom into practice.

He drew out his flute and began to play "Jockey to the Fair" in the style of a man who had never known a moment's sorrow. Oak could pipe with Arcadian sweetness, and the sound of the well-known notes cheered his own heart as well as those of the loungers. He played on with spirit, and in half an hour had earned in pence what was a small fortune to a destitute man.

By making inquiries he learnt that there was another fair at Shottsford the next day.

"Where is Shottsford?"

"Eight miles t'other side of Weatherbury."

Weatherbury! It was where Bathsheba had gone two months before. This information was like coming from night into noon.

"How far is it to Weatherbury?"

"Five or six miles."

Bathsheba had probably left Weatherbury long before this time, but the place had enough interest attaching to it to lead Oak to choose Shottsford fair as his next field of inquiry, because it lay in the Weatherbury quarter. Moreover, the Weatherbury folk were by no means uninteresting intrinsically. If report spoke truly they were as hardy, merry, thriving, wicked a set as any in the whole county. Oak resolved to sleep at Weatherbury that night on his way to Shottsford, and struck out at once into a footpath which had been recommended as a short cut to the village in question.

The path wended through water-meadows traversed by little brooks, whose quivering surfaces were braided along their centres, and folded into creases at the sides, or, where the flow was more rapid, the stream was pied with spots of white froth, which rode on in undisturbed serenity. On the high-road the dead and dry carcasses of leaves tapped the ground as they bowled along helter-skelter upon the shoulders of the wind, and little

birds in the hedges were rustling their feathers and tucking themselves in comfortably for the night, retaining their places if Oak kept moving, but flying away if he stopped to look at them. He passed through a wood where the game-birds were rising to their roosts, and heard the crack-voiced cock-pheasants' "cu-uck, cuck," and the wheezy whistle of the hens.

By the time he had walked three or four miles, every shape on the landscape had assumed a uniform hue of blackness. He ascended a hill and could just discern ahead of him a waggon, drawn up under a great overhanging tree on the roadside.

On coming close, he found there were no horses attached to it, the spot being apparently quite deserted. The waggon, from its position, seemed to have been left there for the night, for beyond about half a truss of hay which was heaped in the bottom, it was quite empty. Gabriel sat down on the shafts of the vehicle and considered his position. He calculated that he had walked a very fair proportion of the journey; and having been on foot since daybreak, he felt tempted to lie down upon the hay in the waggon instead of pushing on to the village of Weatherbury, and having to pay for a lodging.

Eating his last slices of bread and ham, and drinking from the bottle of cider he had taken the

precaution to bring with him, he got into the lonely waggon. Here he spread half of the hay as a bed, and, as well as he could in the darkness, pulled the other half over him by way of bed-clothes, covering himself entirely, and feeling, physically, as comfortable as ever he had been in his life. Inward melancholy it was impossible for a man like Oak, introspective far beyond his neighbours, to banish quite, whilst conning the present untoward page of his history. So, thinking of his misfortunes, amorous and pastoral, he fell asleep, shepherds enjoying, in common with sailors, the privilege of being able to summon the god instead of having to wait for him.

On somewhat suddenly awaking, after a sleep of whose length he had no idea, Oak found that the waggon was in motion. He was being carried along the road at a rate rather considerable for a vehicle without springs, and under circumstances of physical uneasiness, his head being dangled up and down on the bed of the waggon like a kettledrum-stick. He then distinguished voices in conversation, coming from the forepart of the waggon. His concern at this dilemma (which would have been alarm, had he been a thriving man; but misfortune is a fine opiate to personal terror) led him to peer cautiously from the hay, and the first sight he beheld was the stars above

him. Charles's Wain was getting towards a right angle with the Pole star, and Gabriel concluded that it must be about nine o'clock—in other words, that he had slept two hours. This small astronomical calculation was made without any positive effort, and whilst he was stealthily turning to discover, if possible, into whose hands he had fallen.

Two figures were dimly visible in front, sitting with their legs outside the waggon, one of whom was driving. Gabriel soon found that this was the waggoner, and it appeared they had come from Casterbridge fair, like himself.

A conversation was in progress, which continued thus :—

“ Be as 'twill, she's a fine handsome body as far's looks be concerned. But that's only the skin of the woman, and these dandy cattle be as proud as a Lucifer in their insides.”

“ Ay—so 'a seem, Billy Smallbury—so 'a seem.” This utterance was very shaky by nature, and more so by circumstance, the jolting of the waggon not being without its effect upon the speaker's larynx. It came from the man who held the reins.

“ She's a very vain feymell—so 'tis said here and there.”

“ Ah, now. If so be 'tis like that, I can't look her in the face. Lord, no: not I—heh-heh-heh ! Such a shy man as I be !”

"Yes—she's very vain. 'Tis said that every night at going to bed she looks in the glass to put on her nightcap properly."

"And not a married woman. Oh, the world!"

"And 'a can play the peanner, so 'tis said. Can play so clever that 'a can make a psalm tune sound as well as the merriest loose song a man can wish for."

"D'ye tell o't! A happy mercy for us, and I feel quite unspeakable! And how do she pay?"

"That I don't know, Master Poorgrass."

On hearing these and other similar remarks, a wild thought flashed into Gabriel's mind that they might be speaking of Bathsheba. There were, however, no grounds for retaining such a supposition, for the waggon, though going in the direction of Weatherbury, might be going beyond it, and the woman alluded to seemed to be the mistress of some estate. They were now apparently close upon Weatherbury, and not to alarm the speakers unnecessarily, Gabriel slipped out of the waggon unseen.

He turned to an opening in the hedge, which he found to be a stile, and mounting thereon, he sat meditating whether to seek a cheap lodging in the village, or to ensure a cheaper one by lying under some hay or corn-stack. The crunching jangle of the waggon died upon his ear. He was about to

walk on, when he noticed on his left hand an unusual light—appearing about half a mile distant. Oak watched it, and the glow increased. Something was on fire.

Gabriel again mounted the stile, and, leaping down on the other side upon what he found to be ploughed soil, made across the field in the exact direction of the fire. The blaze, enlarging in a double ratio by his approach and its own increase, showed him as he drew nearer the outlines of ricks beside it, lighted up to great distinctness. A rick-yard was the source of the fire. His weary face now began to be painted over with a rich orange glow, and the whole front of his smock-frock and gaiters was covered with a dancing shadow-pattern of thorn-twigs—the light reaching him through a leafless intervening hedge—and the metallic curve of his sheep-crook shone silver-bright in the same abounding rays. He came up to the boundary fence, and stood to regain breath. It seemed as if the spot was unoccupied by a living soul.

The fire was issuing from a long straw-stack, which was so far gone as to preclude a possibility of saving it. A rick burns differently from a house. As the wind blows the fire inwards, the portion in flames completely disappears like melting sugar, and the outline is lost to the eye. However, a hay

or a wheat-rick, well put together, will resist combustion for a length of time, if it begins on the outside.

This before Gabriel's eyes was a rick of straw, loosely put together, and the flames darted into it with lightning swiftness. It glowed on the windward side, rising and falling in intensity, like the coal of a cigar. Then a superincumbent bundle rolled down, with a whisking noise, flames elongated, and bent themselves about, with a quiet roar, but no crackle. Banks of smoke went off horizontally at the back like passing clouds, and behind these burned hidden pyres, illuminating the semi-transparent sheet of smoke to a lustrous yellow uniformity. Individual straws in the foreground were consumed in a creeping movement of ruddy heat, as if they were knots of red worms, and above shone imaginary fiery faces, tongues hanging from lips, glaring eyes, and other impish forms, from which at intervals sparks flew in clusters like birds from a nest.

Oak suddenly ceased from being a mere spectator by discovering the case to be more serious than he had at first imagined. A scroll of smoke blew aside and revealed to him a wheat-rick in startling juxtaposition with the decaying one, and behind this a series of others, composing the main corn produce of the farm; so that instead of the straw-

stack standing, as he had imagined, comparatively isolated, there was a regular connection between it and the remaining stacks of the group.

Gabriel leapt over the hedge, and saw that he was not alone. The first man he came to was running about in a great hurry, as if his thoughts were several yards in advance of his body, which they could never drag on fast enough.

“Oh, man—fire, fire ! A good master and a bad servant is fire, fire !—I mane a bad servant and a good master. Oh, Mark Clark—come ! And you, Billy Smallbury—and you, Maryann Money—and you, Joseph Poorgrass, and Matthew there, for his mercy endureth for ever !” Other figures now appeared behind this shouting man and among the smoke, and Gabriel found that, far from being alone, he was in a great company—whose shadows danced merrily up and down, timed by the jigging of the flames, and not at all by their owner’s movements. The assemblage—belonging to that class of society which casts its thoughts into the form of feeling, and its feelings into the form of commotion—set to work with a remarkable confusion of purpose.

“Stop the draught under the wheat-rick !” cried Gabriel to those nearest to him. The corn stood on stone staddles, and between these, tongues of yellow hues from the burning straw licked and

darted playfully. If the fire once got *under* this stack, all would be lost.

“Get a tarpaulin—quick!” said Gabriel.

A rick-cloth was brought, and they hung it like a curtain across the channel. The flames immediately ceased to go under the bottom of the corn-stack, and stood up vertical.

“Stand here with a bucket of water and keep the cloth wet,” said Gabriel again.

The flames, now driven upwards, began to attack the angles of the huge roof covering the wheat-stack.

“A ladder,” cried Gabriel.

“The ladder was against the straw-rick and is burnt to a cinder,” said a spectre-like form in the smoke.

Oak seized the cut ends of the sheaves, as if he were going to engage in the operation of “reed-drawing,” and digging in his feet, and occasionally sticking in the stem of his sheep-crook, he clambered up the beetling face. He at once sat astride the very apex, and began with his crook to beat off the fiery fragments which had lodged thereon, shouting to the others to get him a bough and a ladder, and some water.

Billy Smallbury—one of the men who had been on the waggon—by this time had found

a ladder, which Mark Clark ascended, holding on beside Oak upon the thatch. The smoke at this corner was stifling, and Clark, a nimble fellow, having been handed a bucket of water, bathed Oak's face and sprinkled him generally, whilst Gabriel, now with a long beech-bough in one hand, in addition to his crook in the other, kept sweeping the stack and dislodging all fiery particles.

On the ground the groups of villagers were still occupied in doing all they could to keep down the conflagration, which was not much. They were all tinged orange, and backed up by shadows as tall as fir-trees. Round the corner of the largest stack, out of the direct rays of the fire, stood a pony, bearing a young woman on its back. By her side was another female, on foot. These two seemed to keep at a distance from the fire, that the horse might not become restive.

"He's a shepherd," said the woman on foot. "Yes—he is. See how his crook shines as he beats the rick with it. And his smock-frock is burnt in two holes, I declare! A fine young shepherd he is too, ma'am."

"Whose shepherd is he?" said the equestrian in a clear voice.

"Don't know, ma'am."

"Don't any of the others know?"

"Nobody at all—I've asked 'em. Quite a stranger, they say."

The young woman on the pony rode out from the shade and looked anxiously around.

"Do you think the barn is safe?" she said.

"D'ye think the barn is safe, Jan Coggan?" said the second woman, passing on the question to the nearest man in that direction.

"Safe now—leastwise I think so. If this rick had gone the barn would have followed. 'Tis that bold shepherd up there that have done the most good—he sitting on the top o' rick, whizzing his great long arms about like a windmill."

"He does work hard," said the young woman on horseback, looking up at Gabriel through her thick woollen veil. "I wish he was shepherd here. Don't any of you know his name?"

"Never heard the man's name in my life, or seed his form afore."

The fire began to get worsted, and Gabriel's elevated position being no longer required of him, he made as if to descend.

"Maryann," said the girl on horseback, "go to him as he comes down, and say that the farmer wishes to thank him for the great service he has done."

Maryann stalked off towards the rick and met Oak at the foot of the ladder. She delivered her message.

"Where is your master the farmer?" asked Gabriel, kindling with the idea of getting employment that seemed to strike him now.

"'Tisn't a master; 'tis a mistress, shepherd."

"A woman farmer?"

"Ay, 'a b'lieve, and a rich one too!" said a bystander. "Lately 'a come here from a distance. Took on her uncle's farm, who died suddenly. Used to measure his money in half-pint cups. They say now that she've business in every bank in Casterbridge, and thinks no more of playing pitch-and-toss-sovereign than you and I do pitch-halfpenny—not a bit in the world, shepherd."

"That's she, back there upon the pony," said Maryann; "wi' her face a-covered up in a cloth with holes in it."

Oak, his features black, grimy, and undiscoverable from the smoke and heat, his smock-frock burnt into holes, dripping with water, the ash-stem of his sheep-crook charred six inches shorter than it had been, advanced with the humility stern adversity had thrust upon him up to the slight female form in the saddle. He lifted his hat with respect, and not with-

out gallantry: stepping close to her hanging feet, he said in a hesitating voice,—

“Do you happen to want a shepherd, ma’am?”

She lifted the Shetland veil tied round her face, and looked all astonishment. Gabriel and his cold-hearted darling, Bathsheba Everdene, were face to face.

Bathsheba did not speak, and he mechanically repeated in an abashed and sad voice,—

“Do you want a shepherd, ma’am ? ”

CHAPTER VII.

RECOGNITION—A TIMID GIRL.

BATHSHEBA withdrew into the shade. She scarcely knew whether most to be amused at the singularity of the meeting, or to be concerned at its awkwardness. There was room for a little pity, also for a very little exultation: the former at his position, the latter at her own. Embarrassed she was not, and she remembered Gabriel's declaration of love to her at Norcombe only to think she had nearly forgotten it.

"Yes," she murmured, putting on an air of dignity, and turning again to him with a little warmth of cheek; "I do want a shepherd. But——"

"He's the very man, ma'am," said one of the villagers, quietly.

Conviction breeds conviction. "Ay, that 'a is," said a second, decisively.

"The man, truly!" said a third, with heartiness.

"He's all there!" said number four, fervidly.

"Then will you tell him to speak to the bailiff," said Bathsheba.

All was practical again now. A summer eve and loneliness would have been necessary to give the meeting its proper fulness of romance.

The bailiff was pointed out to Gabriel, who, checking the palpitation within his breast at discovering that this Ashtoreth of strange report was only a modification of Venus the well-known and admired, retired with him to talk over the necessary preliminaries of hiring.

The fire before them wasted away. "Men," said Bathsheba, "you shall take a little refreshment after this extra work. Will you come to the house?"

"We could knock in a bit and a drop a good deal freer, Miss, if so be ye'd send it to Warren's Malthouse," replied the spokesman.

Bathsheba then rode off into the darkness, and the men straggled on to the village in twos and threes—Oak and the bailiff being left by the rick alone.

"And now," said the bailiff, finally, "all is settled, I think, about yer coming, and I am going home-along. Good-night to ye, shepherd."

"Can you get me a lodging?" inquired Gabriel.

"That I can't, indeed," he said, moving past Oak as a Christian edges past an offertory-plate

when he does not mean to contribute. "If you follow on the road till you come to Warren's Malt-house, where they are all gone to have their snap of victuals, I dare say some of 'em will tell you of a place. Good-night to ye, shepherd."

The bailiff, who showed this nervous dread of loving his neighbours as himself, went up the hill, and Oak walked on to the village, still astonished at the rencontre with Bathsheba, glad of his nearness to her, and perplexed at the rapidity with which the unpractised girl of Norcombe had developed into the supervising and cool woman here. But some women only require an emergency to make them fit for one.

Obliged, to some extent, to forego dreaming in order to find the way, he reached the churchyard, and passed round it under the wall where several old chestnuts grew. There was a wide margin of grass along here, and Gabriel's footsteps were deadened by its softness, even at this indurating period of the year. When abreast of a trunk which appeared to be the oldest of the old, he became aware that a figure was standing behind it on the other side. Gabriel did not pause in his walk, and in another moment he accidentally kicked a loose stone. The noise was enough to disturb the motionless stranger, who started and assumed a careless position.

It was a slim girl, rather thinly clad.

"Good-night to you," said Gabriel, heartily.

"Good-night," said the girl to Gabriel.

The voice was unexpectedly attractive ; it was the low and dulcet note suggestive of romance ; common in descriptions, rare in experience.

"I'll thank you to tell me if I'm in the way for Warren's Malthouse ?" Gabriel resumed, primarily to gain the information, indirectly to get more of the music.

"Quite right. It's at the bottom of the hill. And do you know——" The girl hesitated and then went on again. "Do you know how late they keep open the 'Buck's Head Inn ?'" She seemed to be won by Gabriel's heartiness, as Gabriel had been won by her modulations.

"I don't know where the 'Buck's Head' is, or anything about it. Do you think of going there to-night ?"

"Yes——." The female again paused. There was no necessity for any continuance of speech, and the fact that she did add more seemed to proceed from an unconscious desire to show unconcern by making a remark, which is noticeable in the ingenuous when they are acting by stealth. "You are not a Weatherbury man ?" she said, timorously.

"I am not. I am the new shepherd—just arrived."

"Only a shepherd—and you seem almost a farmer by your ways."

"Only a shepherd," Gabriel repeated, in a dull cadence of finality. His thoughts were directed to the past, his eyes to the feet of the girl, and for the first time he saw lying there a bundle of some sort. She may have perceived the direction of his face, for she said coaxingly,—

"You won't say anything in the parish about having seen me here, will you—at least, not for a day or two?"

"I won't if you wish me not to," said Oak.

"Thank you, indeed," the other replied. "I am rather poor, and I don't want people to know anything about me." Then she was silent and shivered.

"You ought to have a cloak on such a cold night," Gabriel observed. "I would advise you to get indoors."

"Oh no! Would you mind going on and leaving me? I thank you much for what you have told me."

"I will go on," he said; adding hesitatingly,— "Since you are not very well off, perhaps you would accept this trifle from me. It is only a shilling, but it is all I have to spare."

"Yes, I will take it," said the stranger, gratefully.

She extended her hand ; Gabriel his. In feeling for each other's palms in the gloom before the money could be passed, a minute incident occurred which told much. Gabriel's fingers alighted on the young woman's wrist. It was beating with a throb of tragic intensity. He had frequently felt the same quick, hard beat in the femoral artery of his lambs when overdriven. It suggested a consumption too great of a vitality which, to judge from her figure and stature, was already too little.

“What is the matter ?”

“Nothing.”

“But there is ?”

“No, no, no ! Let your having seen me be a secret !”

“Very well ; I will. Good-night, again.”

“Good-night.”

The young girl remained motionless by the tree and Gabriel descended into the village. He fancied that he had felt himself in the penumbra of a very deep sadness when touching that slight and fragile creature. But wisdom lies in moderating mere impressions, and Gabriel endeavoured to think little of this.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE MALTHOUSE—THE CHAT—NEWS.

WARREN's Malthouse was inclosed by an old wall inwrapped with ivy, and though not much of the exterior was visible at this hour, the character and purposes of the building were clearly enough shown by its outline upon the sky. From the walls an overhanging thatched roof sloped up to a point in the centre, upon which rose a small wooden lantern, fitted with louvre-boards on all the four sides, and from these openings a mist was dimly perceived to be escaping into the night air. There was no window in front; but a square hole in the door was glazed with a single pane, through which red, comfortable rays now stretched out upon the ivied wall in front. Voices were to be heard inside.

Oak's hand skimmed the surface of the door with fingers extended to an Elymas-the-Sorcerer pattern, till he found a leathern strap, which he pulled. This lifted a wooden latch, and the door swung open.

The room inside was lighted only by the ruddy glow from the kiln mouth, which shone over the floor with the streaming horizontality of the setting sun, and threw upwards the shadows of all facial irregularities in those assembled around, with the effect of the footlights upon the features of her Majesty's servants when they approach too near the front. The stone-flag floor was worn into a path from the doorway to the kiln, and into undulations everywhere. A curved settle of unplaned oak stretched along one side, and in a remote corner was a small bed and bedstead, the owner and frequent occupier of which was the maltster.

This aged man was now sitting opposite the fire, his frosty white hair and beard overgrowing his gnarled figure like the grey moss and lichen upon a leafless apple-tree. He wore breeches and the laced-up shoes called ankle-jacks; he kept his eyes fixed upon the fire.

Gabriel's nose was greeted by an atmosphere laden with the sweet smell of new malt. The conversation (which seemed to have been concerning the origin of the fire) immediately ceased, and every one ocularly criticized him to the degree expressed by contracting the flesh of their foreheads and looking at him with narrowed eyelids, as if he had been a light too strong for their sight.

Several exclaimed meditatively, after this operation had been completed :—

“ Oh, ‘tis the new shepherd, a’ b’lieve.”

“ We thought we heard a hand pawing about the door for the bobbin, but weren’t sure ‘twere not a dead leaf blowed across,” said another. “ Come in, shepherd ; sure ye be welcome, though we don’t know yer name.”

“ Gabriel Oak, that’s my name, neighbours.”

The ancient maltster sitting in the midst turned at this—his turning being as the turning of a rusty crane.

“ That’s never Gable Oak’s grandson over at Norcombe—never ! ” he said, as a formula expressive of surprise, which nobody was supposed for a moment to take literally.

“ My father and my grandfather were old men of the name of Gabriel,” said the shepherd, placidly.

“ Thought I knowed the man’s face as I seed him on the rick ! —thought I did ! And where be ye trading o’t to now, shepherd ? ”

“ I’m thinking of biding here,” said Mr. Oak.

“ Knowed yer grandfather for years and years ! ” continued the maltster, the words coming forth of their own accord as if the momentum previously imparted had been sufficient.

“ Ah—and did you ! ”

“Knowed yer grandmother.”

“And her too!”

“Likewise knowed yer father when he was a child. Why, my boy Jacob there and your father were sworn brothers—that they were sure—weren’t ye, Jacob?”

“Ay, sure,” said his son, a young man about sixty-five, with a semi-bald head and one tooth in the left centre of his upper jaw, which made much of itself by standing prominent, like a milestone in a bank. “But ‘twas Joe had most to do with him. However, my son William must have knowed the very man afore us—didn’t ye, Billy, afore ye left Norcombe?”

“No, ‘twas Andrew,” said Jacob’s son Billy, a child of forty, or thereabouts, who manifested the peculiarity of possessing a cheerful soul in a gloomy body, and whose whiskers were assuming a chinchilla shade here and there.

“I remember Andrew,” said Oak, “as being a man in the place when I was quite a child.”

“Ay—the other day I and my youngest daughter, Liddy, were over at my grandson’s christening,” continued Billy. “We were talking about this very family, and ‘twas only last Purification Day in this very world, when the use-money is gied away to the second-best poor folk, you know, shepherd, and I can mind the day

because they all had to trapse up to the Vestry—yes, this very man's family."

"Come, shepherd, and drink. 'Tis gape and swaller with us—a drap of sommit, but not of much account," said the maltster, removing from the fire his eyes, which were vermillion-red and bleared by gazing into it for so many years. "Take up the God-forgive-me, Jacob. See if 'tis warm, Jacob."

Jacob stooped to the God-forgive-me, which was a two-handled tall mug standing in the ashes, cracked and charred with heat, rather furred with extraneous matter about the outside, especially in the crevices of the handles, the innermost curves of which may not have seen daylight for several years by reason of this encrustation thereon—formed of ashes accidentally wetted with cider and baked hard; but to the mind of any sensible drinker the cup was no worse for that, being incontestably clean on the inside and about the rim. It may be observed that such a class of mug is called a God-forgive-me in Weatherbury and its vicinity for uncertain reasons; probably because its size makes any given toper feel ashamed of himself when he sees its bottom in drinking it empty: this idea is, however, a mere guess.

Jacob, on receiving the order to see if the liquor was warm enough, placidly dipped his forefinger

into it by way of thermometer, and having pronounced it nearly of the proper degree, raised the cup and very civilly attempted to dust some of the ashes from the bottom with the skirt of his smock-frock, because Shepherd Oak was a stranger.

"A clane cup for the shepherd," said the maltster commandingly.

"No—not at all," said Gabriel, in a reproving tone of considerateness. "I never fuss about dirt in its natural state, and when I know what sort it is." Taking the mug he drank an inch or more from the depth of its contents, and duly passed it to the next man. "I wouldn't think of giving such trouble to neighbours in washing up when there's so much work to be done in the world already," continued Oak, in a moister tone, after recovering from the stoppage of breath ever occasioned by proper pulls at large mugs.

"A right sensible man," said Jacob.

"True, true, as the old woman said," observed a brisk young man—Mark Clark by name, a genial and pleasant gentleman, whom to meet anywhere in your travels was to know, to know was to drink with, and to drink with was, unfortunately, to pay for.

"And here's a mouthful of bread and bacon that mis'ess have sent, shepherd. The cider will

go down better with a bit of victuals. Don't ye chaw quite close, shepherd, for I let the bacon fall in the road outside as I was bringing it along, and may be 'tis rather gritty. There, 'tis clane dirt; and we all know what that is, as you say, and you bain't a particular man we see, shepherd."

"True, true—not at all," said the friendly Oak.

"Don't let yer teeth quite meet, and you won't feel the sandiness at all. Ah! 'tis wonderful what can be done by contrivance!"

"My own mind exactly, neighbour."

"Ah, he's his grandfer's own grandson!—his grandfer were just such a nice unparticular man!" said the maltster.

"Drink, Henry Fray—drink," magnanimously said Jan Coggan, a person who held Saint-Simonian notions of share and share alike where liquor was concerned, as the vessel showed signs of approaching him in its gradual revolution among them.

Having at this moment reached the end of a wistful gaze into mid-air, Henry did not refuse. He was a man of more than middle age, with eyebrows high up in his forehead, who laid it down that the law of the world was bad, with a long-suffering look through his listeners at the world alluded to, as it presented itself to his imagination. He always signed his name "Henery"—strenu-

ously insisting upon that spelling, and if any passing schoolmaster ventured to remark that the second “e” was superfluous and old-fashioned, he received the reply that “H-e-n-e-r-y” was the name he was christened and the name he would stick to—in the tone of one to whom orthographical differences were matters which had a great deal to do with personal character.

Mr. Jan Coggan, who had passed the cup to Henery, was a crimson man with a spacious countenance, and private glimmer in his eye, whose name had appeared on the marriage register of Weatherbury and neighbouring parishes as best man and chief witness in countless unions of the previous twenty years; he also very frequently filled the post of head god-father in baptisms of the subtly-jovial kind.

“Come, Mark Clark—come. Ther’s plenty more in the barrel,” said Jan.

“Ay—that I will, as the doctor said,” replied Mr. Clark, who, twenty years younger than Jan Coggan, revolved in the same orbit. He secreted mirth on all occasions for special discharge at popular parties—his productions of this class being more noticeably advanced than Coggan’s, inflicting a faint sense of reduplication and similitude upon the elder members of such companies.

“Why, Joseph Poorgrass, ye ha’n’t had a

drop!" said Mr. Coggan to a very shrinking man in the background, thrusting the cup towards him.

"Such a shy man as he is!" said Jacob Smallbury. "Why, ye've hardly had strength of eye enough to look in our young mis'ess's face, so I hear, Joseph?"

All looked at Joseph Poorgrass with pitying reproach.

"No—I've hardly looked at her at all," faltered Joseph, reducing his body smaller whilst talking, apparently from a meek sense of undue prominence. "And when I seed her, 'twas nothing but blushes with me!"

"Poor feller," said Mr. Clark.

"'Tis a curious nature for a man," said Jan Coggan.

"Yes," continued Joseph Poorgrass—his shyness, which was so painful as a defect, just beginning to fill him with a little complacency now that it was regarded in the light of an interesting study. "'Twere blush, blush, blush with me every minute of the time, when she was speaking to me."

"I believe ye, Joseph Poorgrass, for we all know ye to be a very bashful man."

"'Tis terrible bad for a man, poor soul," said the maltster. "And how long have ye suffered from it, Joseph?"

"Oh, ever since I was a boy. Yes—mother was concerned to her heart about it—yes. But 'twas all nought."

"Did ye ever take anything to try and stop it, Joseph Poorgrass?"

"Oh ay, tried all sorts. They took me to Greenhill Fair, and into a grate large jerry-gonimble show, where there were women-folk riding round—standing upon horses, with hardly anything on but their smocks, but it didn't cure me a morsel—no, not a morsel. And then I was put errand-man at the Woman's Skittle Alley at the back of the 'Tailor's Arms' in Casterbridge. 'Twas a horrible gross situation, and altogether a very curious place for a good man. I had to stand and look wicked people in the face from morning till night; but 'twas no use—I was just as bad as ever after all. Blushes hev been in the family for generations. There, 'tis a happy providence that I be no worse, so to speak it—yes, a happy thing, and I feel my few poor gratitudes."

"True," said Jacob Smallbury, deepening his thoughts to a profounder view of the subject. "'Tis a thought to look at, that ye might have been worse; but even as you be, 'tis a very bad affliction for ye, Joseph. For ye see, shepherd, though 'tis very well for a woman, dang it all, 'tis awkward for a man like him, poor feller." He appealed to the shepherd by a heart-feeling glance.

"'Tis—'tis," said Gabriel, recovering from a meditation as to whether the saving to a man's soul in the run of a twelvemonth by saying "dang" instead of what it stood for, made it worth while to use the word. "Yes, very awkward for the man."

"Ay, and he's very timid, too," observed Jan Coggan. "Once he had been working late at Windleton, and had had a drap of drink, and lost his way as he was coming home-along through Yalbury Wood, didn't ye, Master Poorgrass ? "

"No, no, no ; not that story !" ex postulated the modest man, forcing a laugh to bury his concern, and forcing out too much for the purpose—laughing over the greater part of his skin, round to his ears, and up among his hair, insomuch that Shepherd Oak, who was rather sensitive himself, was surfeited, and felt he would never adopt that plan for hiding trepidation any more.

"—And so 'a lost himself quite,' continued Mr. Coggan, with an impassive face, implying that a true narrative, like time and tide, must run its course and would wait for no man. "And as he was coming along in the middle of the night, much afeard, and not able to find his way out of the trees, nohow, 'a cried out, 'Man-a-lost ! man-a-lost !' A owl in a tree happened to be crying 'Whoo-whoo-whoo !' as owls do, you know, shep-

herd ” (Gabriel nodded), “and Joseph, all in a tremble, said ‘ Joseph Poorgrass, of Weatherbury, sir ! ’ ”

“No, no, now—that’s too much ! ” said the timid man, becoming a man of brazen courage all of a sudden. “I didn’t say *sir*. I’ll take my oath I didn’t say ‘ Joseph Poorgrass o’ Weatherbury, *sir*.’ No, no ; what’s right is right, and I never said sir to the bird, knowing very well that no person of a gentleman’s rank would be hollering there at that time o’ night. ‘ Joseph Poorgrass of Weatherbury,—that’s every word I said, and I shouldn’t ha’ said that if ’t hadn’t been for Keeper Day’s metheglin. . . . There, ’twas a merciful thing it ended where it did, as I may say,” continued Joseph, swallowing his breath in content.

The question of which was right being tacitly waived by the company, Jan went on meditatively :—

“And he’s the fearfulest man, bain’t ye, Joseph ? Ay, another time ye were lost by Lambing-Down Gate, weren’t ye, Joseph ? ”

“I was,” replied Poorgrass, as if there were some matters too serious even for modesty to remember itself under, and this was one.

“Yes ; that were the middle of the night, too. The gate would not open, try how he would, and

knowing there was the Devil's hand in it, he kneeled down."

"Ay," said Joseph, acquiring confidence from the warmth of the fire, the cider, and a growing perception of the narrative capabilities of the experience alluded to. "My heart died within me, that time; but I kneeled down and said the Lord's Prayer, and then the Belief right through, and then the Ten Commandments, in earnest prayer. But no, the gate wouldn't open; and then I went on with Dearly Beloved Brethren, and, thinks I, this makes four, and 'tis all I know out of book, and if this don't do it nothing will, and I'm a lost man. Well, when I got to Saying After Me, I rose from my knees and found the gate would open—yes, neighbours, the gate opened the same as ever."

A meditation on the obvious inference was indulged in by all, and during its continuance each directed his vision into the ashpit, which glowed like a desert in the tropics under a vertical sun, shaping their eyes long and liny, partly because of the light, partly from the depth of the subject discussed—each man severally drawing upon the tablet of his imagination a clear and correct picture of Joseph Poorgrass under the remarkable conditions he had related, and surveying the position in all its bearings with critical exactness.

Gabriel broke the silence. "What sort of a place is this to live at, and what sort of a missess is she to work under?" Gabriel's bosom thrilled gently as he thus slipped under the notice of the assembly the innermost subject of his heart.

"We d' know little of her—nothing. She only showed herself a few days ago. Her uncle was took bad, and the doctor was called with his world-wide skill; but he couldn't save the man. As I take it, she's going to keep on the farm."

"That's about the shape o't, 'a b'lieve," said Jan Coggan. "Ay, 'tis a very good family. I'd as soon be under 'em as under one here and there. Her uncle was a very fair sort of man. Did ye know en, shepherd—a bachelor-man?"

"Not at all."

The inquirer paused a moment, and then continued his relation, which, as did every remark he made, instead of being casual, seemed the result of a slow convergence of forces that had commenced their operation in times far remote.

"I used to go to his house a-courting my first wife, Charlotte, who was his dairymaid. Well, a very good-hearted man were Farmer Everdene, and I being a respectable young fellow was allowed to call and see her and drink as much ale as I liked, but not to carry away any—outside my skin I mane, of course."

"Ay, ay, Jan Coggan; we know yer maning."

"And so you see 'twas beautiful ale, and I wished to value his kindness as much as I could, and not to be so ill-mannered as to drink only a thimbleful, which would have been insulting the man's generosity——"

"True, Master Coggan, 'twould so," corroborated Mark Clark.

"——And so I used to eat a lot of salt afore going, and then by the time I got there I were as dry as a lime-basket—so thorough dry that that ale would slip down—ah, 'twould slip down sweet! Happy times! heavenly times! Ay, 'twere like drinking blessedness itself. Pints and pints! Such lovely drunks as I used to have at that house. You can mind, Jacob? You used to go wi' me sometimes."

"I can—I can," said Jacob. "That one, too, that we had at Buck's Head on a White Monday was a pretty tipple—a very pretty tipple, indeed."

"'Twas. But for a drunk of really a noble class and on the highest principles, that brought you no nearer to the dark man than you were afore you begun, there was none like those in Farmer Everdene's kitchen. Not a single damn allowed; no, not a bare poor one, even at the most cheerful moment when all were blindest, though the good old word of sin thrown in here and there would have been a great relief to a merry soul."

"True," said the maltster. "Nature requires her swearing at the regular times, or she's not herself; and unholy exclamations is a necessity of life."

"But Charlotte," continued Coggan—"not a word of the sort would Charlotte allow, nor the smallest item of taking in vain. . . . Ay, poor Charlotte, I wonder if she had the good fortune to get into Heaven when 'a died! But 'a was never much in luck's way, and perhaps 'a went downwards after all, poor soul."

"And did any of you know Miss Everdene's father and mother?" inquired the shepherd, who found some difficulty in keeping the conversation in the desired channel.

"I knew them a little," said Jacob Smallbury; "but they were townsfolk, and didn't live here. They've been dead for years. Father, what sort of people were mis'ess' father and mother?"

"Well," said the maltster, "he wasn't much to look at; but she was a lovely woman. He was fond enough of her as his sweetheart."

"Used to kiss her in scores and long-hundreds, so 'twas said here and there," observed Coggan.

"He was very proud of her, too, when they were married, as I've been told," said the maltster.

"Ay," said Coggan. "He admired his wife so much, that he used to light the candle three times every night to look at her."

"Boundless love; I shouldn't have supposed it in the world's universe!" murmured Joseph Poorgrass, who habitually spoke on a large scale in his moral reflections.

"Well, to be sure," said Gabriel.

"Oh, 'tis true enough. I knowed the man and woman both well. Levi Everdene—that was the man's name, sure enough. 'Man,' saith I in my hurry, but he were of a higher circle of life than that—'a was a gentleman-tailor really, worth scores of pounds. And he became a very celebrated bankrupt two or three times."

"Oh, I thought he was quite a common man!" said Joseph.

"Oh no, no! That man failed for heaps of money; hundreds in gold and silver."

The maltster being rather short of breath, Mr. Coggan, after absently scrutinizing a coal which had fallen among the ashes, took up the narrative, with a private twirl of his eye:—

"Well, now, you'd hardly believe it, but that man—our Miss Everdene's father—was one of the ficklest husbands alive, after a while. Understand, 'a didn't want to be fickle, but he couldn't help it. The pore feller were faithful and true enough to her in his wish, but his heart would rove, do what he would. Ay, 'a spoke to me in real tribulation about it once. 'Coggan,' he said, 'I could never

wish for a handsomer woman than I've got, but feeling she's ticketed as my lawful wife, I can't help my wicked heart wandering, do what I will.' But at last I believe he cured it by making her take off her wedding-ring and calling her by her maiden name as they sat together after the shop was shut, and so 'a would get to fancy she was only his sweetheart, and not married to him at all. And so as soon as he could thoroughly fancy he was doing wrong and committing the seventh, 'a got to like her as well as ever, and they lived on a perfect example of mutual love."

"Well, 'twas a most ungodly remedy," murmured Joseph Poorgrass; "but we ought to feel deep cheerfulness, as I may say, that a happy Providence kept it from being any worse. You see, he might have gone the bad road and given his eyes to unlawfulness entirely—yes, gross unlawfulness, so to say it."

"You see," said Billy Smallbury, with testimonial emphasis, "the man's will was to do right, sure enough, but his heart didn't chime in."

"He got so much better, that he was quite religious in his later years, wasn't he, Jan?" said Joseph Poorgrass. "He got himself confirmed over again in a more serious way, and took to saying 'Amen' almost as loud as a clerk, and he liked to copy comforting verses from the

tombstones. He used, too, to hold the holy money-plate at Let Your Light so Shine, and stand godfather to poor little come-by-chance children that had no father at all in the eye of matrimony, and he kept a missionary box upon his table to nab folks unawares when they called ; yes, and he would box the charity-boys' ears, if they laughed in church, till they could hardly stand upright, and do other deeds of piety common to the saintly inclined."

"Ay, at that time he thought of nothing but righteousness," added Billy Smallbury. "One day Parson Thirdly met him and said, 'Good-morning, Mister Everdene ; 'tis a fine day !' 'Amen,' said Everdene, quite absent-like, thinking only of religion when he seed a parson. Yes, he was a very Christian man."

"His second-cousin, John, was the most religious of the family, however," said the old maltster. "None of the others were so pious as he, for they never went past us Church people in their Christianity, but John's feelings growed as strong as a chapel member's. 'A was a watch and clock maker by trade, and thought of nothing but godliness, poor man. 'I judge every clock according to his works,' he used to say when he were in his holy frame of mind. Ay, he likewise was a very Christian man."

"Their daughter was not at all a pretty chiel at that time," said Henery Fray. "Never should have thought she'd have growed up such a handsome body as she is."

"'Tis to be hoped her temper is as good as her face."

"Well, yes; but the baily will have most to do with the business and ourselves. Ah!" Henery shook his head, gazed into the ashpit, and smiled volumes of ironical knowledge.

"A queer Christian, as the D—— said of the owl," volunteered Mark Clark.

"He is," said Henery, with a manner implying that irony must necessarily cease at a certain point. "Between we two, man and man, I believe that man would as soon tell a lie Sundays as working-days, that I do so."

"Good faith, you do talk!" said Gabriel, with apprehension.

"True enough," said the man of bitter moods, looking round upon the company, with the anti-thetic laughter that comes from a keener appreciation of the untold miseries of life than ordinary men are capable of. "Ah, there's people of one sort, and people of another, but that man—bless your souls!"

The company suspended consideration of whether they wanted their souls blessed that

moment, as the shortest way to the end of the story.

"I believe that if so be that Baily Pennyways' heart were put inside a nutshell, he'd rattle," continued Henery. "He'll strain for money as a salmon will strain for the river's head. 'Tis a thief and a robber, that's what 'tis."

Gabriel thought fit to change the subject. "You must be a very aged man, maltster, to have sons growed up so old and ancient," he remarked.

"Father's so old that 'a can't mind his age, can ye, father ?" interposed Jacob. "And he's growed terrible crooked, too, lately," Jacob continued, surveying his father's figure, which was rather more bowed than his own. "Really, one may say that father there is three-double."

"Crooked folk will last a long while," said the maltster, grimly, and not in the best humour.

"Shepherd would like to hear the pedigree of yer life, father—wouldn't ye, shepherd?"

"Ay, that I should," said Gabriel, with the heartiness of a man who had longed to hear it for several months. "What may your age be, maltster ?"

The maltster cleared his throat in an exaggerated form for emphasis, and elongating his gaze to the remotest point of the ashpit, said, in the slow speech justifiable when the importance of a

subject is so generally felt that any mannerism must be tolerated in getting at it, "Well, I don't mind the year I were born in, but perhaps I can reckon up the places I've lived at, and so get it that way. I bode at Juddle Farm across there" (nodding to the north) "till I were eleven. I bode seven at Lower Twifford" (nodding to the east), "where I took to malting. I went therefrom to Norcombe, and malted there two-and-twenty years, and two-and-twenty years I was there turnip-hoeing and harvesting. Ah, I knowed that old place, Norcombe, years afore you were thought of, Master Oak" (Oak smiled a corroboration of the fact). "Then I malted at Snoodly-under-Drool four year, and four year turnip hoeing; and I was fourteen times eleven months at Moreford St. Jude's" (nodding north-west-by-north). "Old Twills wouldn't hire me for more than eleven months at a time, to keep me from being chargeable to the parish if so be I was disabled. Then I was three year at Mellstock, and I've been here one-and-thirty year come Candlemas. How much is that?"

"Hundred and seventeen," chuckled another old gentleman, given to mental arithmetic and little conversation, who had hitherto sat unobserved in a corner.

"Well, then, that's my age," said the maltster, emphatically.

"Oh, no, father!" Jacob remonstrated. "Your turnip-hoeing were in the summer and your malting in the winter of the same years, and ye don't ought to count both halves, father."

"Chok' it all! I lived through the summers, didn't I? That's my question. I suppose ye'll say next I be no age at all to speak of?"

"Sure we sha'n't," said Gabriel, soothingly.

"Ye be a very old-aged person, maltster," attested Jan Coggan, also soothingly. "We all know that, and ye must have a wonderful talented constitution to be able to live so long, mustn't he, neighbours?"

"True, true; ye must, maltster, a wonderful talented constitution," said the meeting unanimously.

The maltster, being now pacified, was even generous enough to voluntarily disparage in a slight degree the virtue of having lived a great many years, by mentioning that the cup they were drinking out of was three years older than he.

While the cup was being examined, the end of Gabriel Oak's flute became visible over his smock-frock pocket, and Henery Fray exclaimed, "Surely, shepherd, I seed you blowing into a grate flute by-now at Casterbridge?"

"You did," said Gabriel, blushing faintly. "I've been in great trouble, neighbours, and was driven to it. I used not to be so poor as I be now."

"Never mind, heart!" said Mark Clark. "You should take it careless-like, shepherd, and your time will come. But we could thank ye for a tune, if ye bain't too tired?"

"Neither drum nor trumpet have I heard this Christmas," said Jan Coggan. "Come, raise a tune, Master Oak!"

"Ay, that I will," said Gabriel readily, pulling out his flute and putting it together. "A poor tool, neighbours; an everyday chap; but such as I can do ye shall have and welcome."

Oak then struck up "Jockey to the Fair," and played that sparkling melody three times through, accenting the notes in the third round in a most artistic and lively manner by bending his body in small jerks and tapping with his foot to beat time.

"He can blow the flute very well—that 'a can,'" said a young married man, who having no individuality worth mentioning was known as "Susan Tall's husband." He continued admiringly, "I'd as lief as not be able to blow into a flute as well as that."

"He's a clever man, and 'tis a true comfort for us to have such a shepherd," murmured Joseph Poorgrass, in a soft and complacent

cadence. "We ought to feel real thanksgiving that he's not a player of loose songs instead of these merry tunes; for 'twould have been just as easy for God to have made the shepherd a lewd low man—a man of iniquity, so to speak it—as what he is. Yes, for our wives' and daughters' sakes we should feel real thanksgiving."

"True, true, as the old woman said," dashed in Mark Clark conclusively, not feeling it to be of any consequence to his opinion that he had only heard about a word and three-quarters of what Joseph had said.

"Yes," added Joseph, beginning to feel like a man in the Bible; "for evil does thrive so in these times that ye may be as much deceived in the clanest shaved and whitest shirted man as in the raggedest tramp upon the turnpike, if I may term it so."

"Ay, I can mind yer face now, shepherd," said Henery Fray, criticising Gabriel with misty eyes as he entered upon his second tune. "Yes—now I see ye blowing into the flute I know ye to be the same man I see play at Casterbridge, for yer mouth were scrimped up and yer eyes a-starting out like a strangled man's—just as they be now."

"'Tis a pity that playing the flute should make a man look such a scarecrow," observed Mr.

Mark Clark, with additional criticism of Gabriel's countenance, the latter person jerking out unconcernedly, with the ghastly grimace required by the instrument, the chorus of "Dame Durden :"—

'Twas Moll' and Bet', and Doll' and Kate'
And Dor'-othy Drag'-gle Tail'.

"I hope you don't mind that young man Mark Clark's bad manners in naming your features?" whispered Joseph to Gabriel privately.

"Not at all," said Mr. Oak.

"For by nature ye be a very handsome man, shepherd," continued Joseph Poograss, with winning suavity.

"Ay, that ye be, shepherd," said the company.

"Thank you very much," said Oak, in the modest tone good manners demanded, privately thinking, however, that he would never let Bathsheba see him playing the flute; in this resolve showing a discretion equal to that related of its sagacious inventress, the divine Minerva herself.

"Ah, when I and my wife were married at Norcombe Church," said the old maltster, not pleased at finding himself left out of the subject, "we were called the handsomest couple in the neighbourhood—everybody said so."

"Danged if ye bain't altered now, maltster," said a voice, with the vigour natural to the enun-

ciation of a remarkably evident truism. It came from the old man in the background, whose general offensivenesss and spiteful ways were barely atoned for by the occasional chuckle he contributed to general laughs.

"Oh, no, no," said Gabriel.

"Don't ye play no more, shepherd," said Susan Tall's husband, the young married man who had spoken once before. "I must be moving, and when there's tunes going on I seem as if hung in wires. If I thought after I'd left that music was still playing, and I not there, I should be quite melancholy-like."

"What's yer hurry then, Laban?" inquired Coggan. "You used to bide as late as the latest."

"Well, ye see, neighbours, I was lately married to a woman, and she's my vocation now, and so ye see . . ." The young man halted lamely.

"New lords new laws, as the saying is, I suppose," remarked Coggan, with a very compressed countenance; that the frigidity implied by this arrangement of facial muscles was not the true mood of his soul being only discernible from a private glimmer in the outer corner of one of his eyes—this eye being nearly closed, and the other only half open.

"Ay, 'a b'lieve—ha, ha!" said Susan Tall's husband, in a tone intended to imply his habitual

reception of jokes without minding them at all. The young man then wished them good-night and withdrew.

Henery Fray was the first to follow. Then Gabriel arose and went off with Jan Coggan, who had offered him a lodging. A few minutes later, when the remaining ones were on their legs and about to depart, Fray came back again in a hurry. Flourishing his finger ominously he threw a gaze teeming with tidings just where his glance alighted by accident, which happened to be in Joseph Poorgrass's eye.

"Oh—what's the matter, what's the matter, Henery?" said Joseph, starting back.

"What's a-brewing, Henery?" asked Jacob and Mark Clark.

"Baily Pennyways—Baily Pennyways—I said so; yes, I said so."

"What, found out stealing anything?"

"Stealing it is. The news is, that after Miss Everdene got home she went out again to see all was safe, as she usually do, and coming in found Baily Pennyways creeping down the granary steps with half a bushel of barley. She flewed at him like a cat—never such a tom-boy as she is—of course I speak with closed doors?"

"You do—you do, Henery."

"She flewed at him, and, to cut a long story

short, he owned to having carried off five sack altogether, upon her promising not to persecute him. Well, he's turned out neck and crop, and my question is, who's going to be baily now ? ”

The question was such a profound one that Henery was obliged to drink there and then from the large cup till the bottom was distinctly visible inside. Before he had replaced it on the table, in came the young man, Susan Tall’s husband, in a still greater hurry.

“ Have ye heard the news that’s all over parish ? ”

“ About Baily Pennyways ? ”

“ Ah—but besides that ? ”

“ No—not a morsel of it ! ” they all replied, looking into the very midst of Laban Tall, and, as it were, advancing their intelligence to meet his words half way down his throat.

“ What a night of horrors ! ” murmured Joseph Poorgrass, waving his hands spasmodically. “ I’ve had the news-bell ringing in my left ear quite bad enough for a murder, and I’ve seed a magpie all alone ! ”

“ Fanny Robin—Miss Everdene’s youngest servant—can’t be found. They’ve been wanting to lock up the door these two hours, but she isn’t come in. And they don’t know what to do about going to bed for fear of locking her out. They

wouldn't be so concerned if she hadn't been noticed in such low spirits these last few days, and Marryann d' think the beginning of a crowner's inquest has happened to the poor girl."

"Oh—'tis burned—'tis burned!" said Joseph Poorgrass with dry lips.

"No—'tis drowned!" said Tall.

"Or 'tis her father's razor!" suggested Billy Smallbury, with a vivid sense of detail.

"Well—Miss Everdene wants to speak to one or two of us before we go to bed. What with this trouble about the baily, and now about the girl, mis'ess is almost wild."

They all hastened up the rise to the farm-house, excepting the old maltster, whom neither news, fire, rain, nor thunder could draw from his hole. There, as the others' footsteps died away, he sat down again, and continued gazing as usual into the furnace with his red, bleared eyes.

From the bed-room window above their heads Bathsheba's head and shoulders, robed in mystic white, were dimly seen extended into the air.

"Are any of my men among you?" she said anxiously.

"Yes, ma'am, several," said Susan Tall's husband.

"To-morrow morning I wish two or three of you to make inquiries in the villages round

if they have seen such a person as Fanny Robin. Do it quietly; there is no reason for alarm as yet. She must have left whilst we were all at the fire."

"I beg yer pardon, but had she any young man courting her in the parish, ma'am?" asked Jacob Smallbury.

"I don't know," said Bathsheba.

"I've never heard of any such thing, ma'am," said two or three.

"It is hardly likely, either," continued Bathsheba. "For any lover of hers might have come to the house if he had been a respectable lad. The most mysterious matter connected with her absence—indeed, the only thing which gives me serious alarm—is that she was seen to go out of the house by Maryann with only her indoor working gown on—not even a bonnet."

"And you mean, ma'am, excusing my words, that a young woman would hardly go to see her young man without dressing up," said Jacob, turning his mental vision upon past experiences. "That's true—she would not, ma'am."

"She had, I think, a bundle, though I couldn't see very well," said a female voice from another window, which seemed to belong to Maryann. "But she had no young man about here. Hers lives in Casterbridge, and I believe he's a soldier."

"Do you know his name?" Bathsheba said.

"No, mistress; she was very close about it."

"Perhaps I might be able to find out if I went to Casterbridge barracks," said William Smallbury.

"Very well; if she doesn't return to-morrow, mind you go there and try to discover which man it is, and see him. I feel more responsible than I should if she had had any friends or relations alive. I do hope she has come to no harm through a man of that kind. . . . And then there's this disgraceful affair of the bailiff—but I can't speak of him now."

Bathsheba had so many reasons for uneasiness that it seemed she did not think it worth while to dwell upon any particular one. "Do as I told you, then," she said in conclusion, closing the casement.

"Ay, ay, mistress; we will," they replied, and moved away.

That night at Coggan's, Gabriel Oak, beneath the screen of closed eyelids, was busy with fancies, and full of movement, like a river flowing rapidly under its ice. Night had always been the time at which he saw Bathsheba most vividly, and through the slow hours of shadow he tenderly regarded her image now. It is rarely that the pleasures of the imagination will compensate for the pain of sleeplessness, but they possibly did with Oak to-night,

for the delight of merely seeing effaced for the time his perception of the great difference between seeing and possessing.

He also thought of plans for fetching his few utensils and books from Norcombe. *The Young Man's Best Companion*, *The Farrier's Sure Guide*, *The Veterinary Surgeon*, *Paradise Lost*, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *Ash's Dictionary*, and *Walkingame's Arithmetic*, constituted his library; and though a limited series, it was one from which he had acquired more sound information by diligent perusal than many a man of opportunities has done from a furlong of laden shelves.

CHAPTER IX.

THE HOMESTEAD—A VISITOR—HALF-CONFIDENCES.

By daylight, the bower of Oak's new-found mistress, Bathsheba Everdene, presented itself as a hoary building, of the Jacobean stage of Classic Renaissance as regards its architecture, and of a proportion which told at a glance that, as is so frequently the case, it had once been the manorial hall upon a small estate around it, now altogether effaced as a distinct property, and merged in the vast tract of a non-resident landlord, which comprised several such modest demesnes.

Fluted pilasters, worked from the solid stone, decorated its front, and above the roof pairs of chimneys were here and there linked by an arch, some gables and other unmanageable features still retaining traces of their Gothic extraction. Soft brown mosses, like faded velveteen, formed cushions upon the stone tiling, and tufts of the houseleek or sengreen sprouted from the eaves of the low surrounding buildings. A gravel walk

leading from the door to the road in front was encrusted at the sides with more moss—here it was a silver-green variety—the nut-brown of the gravel being visible to the width of only a foot or two in the centre. This circumstance, and the generally sleepy air of the whole prospect here, together with the animated and contrasting state of the reverse façade, suggested to the imagination that on the adaptation of the building for farming purposes the vital principle of the house had turned round inside its body to face the other way. Reversals of this kind, strange deformities, tremendous paralyses, are often seen to be inflicted by trade upon edifices—either individual or in the aggregate as streets and towns—which were originally planned for pleasure alone.

Lively voices were heard this morning in the upper rooms, the main staircase to which was of hard oak, the balusters, heavy as bed-posts, being turned and moulded in the quaint fashion of their century, the handrail as stout as a parapet-top, and the stairs themselves continually twisting round like a person trying to look over his shoulder. Going up, we find the floors above to have a very irregular surface, rising to ridges, sinking into valleys, and being at present uncarpeted, the face of the boards is shown to be eaten into innumerable vermiculations. Every window replies by a clang

to the opening and shutting of every door, a tremble follows every bustling movement, and a creak accompanies a walker about the house, like a spirit, wherever he goes.

In the room from which the conversation proceeded, Bathsheba and her servant-companion, Liddy Smallbury, were to be discovered sitting upon the floor, and sorting a complication of papers, books, bottles, and rubbish spread out thereon—remnants from the household stores of the late occupier. Liddy, the maltster's great-granddaughter, was about Bathsheba's equal in age, and her face was a prominent advertisement of the light-hearted English country girl. The beauty her features might have lacked in form was amply made up for by perfection of hue, which at this winter time was the softened ruddiness on a surface of high rotundity that we meet with in a Terburg or a Gerard Douw, and like the presentations of those great colourists, it was a face which always kept on the natural side of the boundary between comeliness and the ideal. Though elastic in bearing, she was less daring than Bathsheba, and occasionally showed some earnestness, which consisted half of genuine feeling, and half of factitious mannerliness superadded by way of duty.

Through a partly-opened door, the noise of a scrubbing-brush led up to the charwoman, Maryann

Money, a person who for a face had a circular disc, furrowed less by age than by long gazes of perplexity at distant objects. To think of her was to get good-humoured; to speak of her was to raise the image of a dried Normandy-pippin.

“Stop your scrubbing a moment,” said Bathsheba through the door to her. “I hear something.”

Maryann suspended the brush.

The tramp of a horse was apparent, approaching the front of the building. The paces slackened, turned in at the wicket, and, what was most unusual, came up the mossy path close to the door. The door was tapped with the end of a whip or stick.

“What impertinence!” said Liddy in a low voice. “To ride up the footpath like that! Why didn’t he stop at the gate? Lord! ’tis a gentleman! I see the top of his hat.”

“Be quiet!” said Bathsheba.

The further expression of Liddy’s concern was continued by exhibition instead of relation.

“Why doesn’t Mrs. Coggan go to the door?” Bathsheba continued.

Rat-tat-tat-tat, resounded more decisively from Bathsheba’s oak.

“Maryann, you go!” said she, fluttering under the onset of a crowd of romantic possibilities.

"Oh, ma'am—see, here's a mess!"

The argument was unanswerable after a glance at Maryann.

"Liddy—you must," said Bathsheba.

Liddy held up her hands and arms, coated with dust from the rubbish they were sorting, and looked imploringly at her mistress.

"There—Mrs. Coggan is going!" said Bathsheba, exhaling her relief in the form of a long breath, which had lain in her bosom a minute or more.

The door opened, and a deep voice said,—

"Is Miss Everdene at home?"

"I'll see, sir," said Mrs. Coggan, and in a minute appeared in the room.

"Dear, dear, what a universe this world is!" continued Mrs. Coggan (a wholesome-looking lady who had a voice for each class of remark according to the emotion involved: who could toss a pancake or twirl a mop with the accuracy of pure mathematics, and who appeared at this moment with hands shaggy with fragments of dough and arms encrusted with flour). "I am never up to my elbows, Miss, in making a pudding but one of two things happens—either my nose must needs begin tickling, and I can't live without scratching it, or somebody knocks at the door. Here's Mr. Boldwood wanting to see you, Miss Everdene."

A woman's dress being a part of her countenance, and any disorder in the one being of the same nature with a malformation or wound in the other, Bathsheba said at once,—

“I can't see him in this state. Whatever shall I do?”

Not-at-homes were hardly naturalized in Weatherbury farm-houses, so Liddy suggested—“Say you're a fright with dust, and can't come down.”

“Yes—that sounds very well,” said Mrs. Coggan, critically.

“Say I can't see him—that will do.”

Mrs. Coggan went downstairs, and returned the answer as requested, adding, however, on her own responsibility, “Miss is dusting bottles, sir, and is quite a object—that's why 'tis.”

“Oh, very well,” said the deep voice, indifferently. “All I wanted to ask was, if anything had been heard of Fanny Robin?”

“Nothing, sir—but we may know to-night. William Smallbury is gone to Casterbridge, where her young man lives, as is supposed, and the other men be inquiring about everywhere.”

The horse's tramp then recommenced and retreated, and the door closed.

“Who is Mr. Boldwood?” said Bathsheba.

“A gentleman-farmer at Lower Weatherbury.”

“Married?”

“No, miss.”

“How old is he?”

“Forty, I should say—very handsome—rather stern-looking—and rich.”

“What a bother this dusting is! I am always in some unfortunate plight or other,” Bathsheba said, complainingly. “Why should he inquire about Fanny?”

“Oh, because, as she had no friends in her childhood, he took her and put her to school, and got her her place here under your uncle. He’s a very kind man that way, but Lord—there!”

“What?”

“Never was such a hopeless man for a woman! He’s been courted by sixes and sevens—all the girls, gentle and simple, for miles round, have tried him. Jane Perkins worked at him for two months like a slave, and the two Miss Taylors spent a year upon him, and he cost Farmer Ives’s daughter nights of tears and twenty pounds’ worth of new clothes; but Lord—the money might as well have been thrown out of the window.”

A little boy came up at this moment and looked in upon them. This child was one of the Coggans (Smallburys and Coggans were as common among the families of this district as the Avons and Derwents among our rivers), and he always had a

loosened tooth or a cut finger to show to particular friends, which he did with a complacent air of being thereby elevated above the common herd of afflictionless humanity—to which exhibition people were expected to say, “Poor child!” with a dash of congratulation as well as pity.

“I’ve got a pen-nee!” said Master Coggan in a scanning measure.

“Well—who gave it you, Teddy?” said Liddy.

“Mis-terr Bold-wood! He gave it to me for opening the gate.”

“What did he say?”

“He said, ‘Where are you going, my little man?’ and I said, ‘To Miss Everdene’s, please;’ and he said, ‘She is a staid woman, isn’t she, my little man?’ and I said, ‘Yes.’”

“You naughty child! What did you say that for?”

“ ’Cause he gave me the penny!”

“What a pucker everything is in!” said Bathsheba, discontentedly, when the child had gone. “Get away, Maryann, or go on with your scrubbing, or do something! You ought to be married by this time, and not here troubling me.”

“Ay, mistress—so I did. But what between the poor men I won’t have, and the rich men who won’t have me, I stand forlorn as a pelican in the wilderness. Ah, poor soul of me!”

"Did anybody ever want to marry you, miss?" Liddy ventured to ask when they were again alone. "Lots of 'em, I daresay?"

Bathsheba paused as if about to refuse a reply, but the temptation to say yes, since it really was in her power, was irresistible by aspiring virginity, in spite of her spleen at having been published as old.

"A man wanted to once," she said, in a highly experienced tone, and the image of Gabriel Oak, as the farmer, rose before her.

"How nice it must seem!" said Liddy, with the fixed features of mental realization. "And you wouldn't have him?"

"He wasn't quite good enough for me."

"How sweet to be able to disdain, when most of us are glad to say 'Thank you!' I seem I hear it. 'No, sir—I'm your better,' or 'Kiss my foot, sir; my face is for mouths of consequence.' And did you love him, miss?"

"Oh no. But I rather liked him."

"Do you now?"

"Of course not—what footsteps are those I hear?"

Liddy looked from a back window into the courtyard behind, which was now getting low-toned and dim with the earliest films of night. A crooked file of men was approaching the back door.

The whole string of trailing individuals advanced in the completest balance of intention, like the remarkable creatures known as Chain Salpæ, which, distinctly organized in other respects, have one will common to a whole family. Some were, as usual, in snow-white smock-frocks of Russia duck, and some in whitey-brown ones of drabbet—marked on the wrists, breasts, backs, and sleeves with honeycomb-work. Two or three women in pattens brought up the rear.

“The Philistines are upon us,” said Liddy, making her nose white against the glass.

“Oh, very well. Maryann, go down and keep them in the kitchen till I am dressed, and then show them in to me in the hall.”

CHAPTER X.

MISTRESS AND MEN.

HALF-AN-HOUR later Bathsheba, in finished dress, and followed by Liddy, entered the upper end of the old hall to find that her men had all deposited themselves on a long form and a settle at the lower extremity. She sat down at a table and opened the time-book, pen in her hand, and a canvas money-bag beside her. From this she poured a small heap of coin. Liddy took up a position at her elbow and began to sew, sometimes pausing and looking round, or with the air of a privileged person, taking up one of the half-sovereigns lying before her, and admiringly surveying it as a work of art merely, strictly preventing her countenance from expressing any wish to possess it as money.

“Now, before I begin, men,” said Bathsheba, “I have two matters to speak of. The first is that the bailiff is dismissed for thieving, and that

I have formed a resolution to have no bailiff at all, but to manage everything with my own head and hands."

The men breathed an audible breath of amazement.

"The next matter is, have you heard anything of Fanny?"

"Nothing, ma'am."

"Have you done anything?"

"I met Farmer Boldwood," said Jacob Smallbury, "and I went with him and two of his men, and dragged Wood Pond, but we found nothing."

"And the new shepherd have been to Buck's Head, thinking she had gone there, but nobody had seed her," said Laban Tall.

"Hasn't William Smallbury been to Casterbridge?"

"Yes, ma'am, but he's not yet come home. He promised to be back by six."

"It wants a quarter to six at present," said Bathsheba, looking at her watch. "I daresay he'll be in directly. Well, now then"—she looked into the book—"Joseph Poorgrass, are you there?"

"Yes, sir—ma'am I mane," said the person addressed. "I am the personal name of Poorgrass—a small matter who is nothing in his own eye. Perhaps it is different in the eye of other

people—but I don’t say it; though public thought will out.”

“What do you do on the farm?”

“I does carting things all the year, and in seed time I shoots the rooks and sparrows, and helps at pig-killing, sir.”

“How much to you?”

“Please nine and ninepence and a good half-penny where ’twas a bad one, sir—ma’am I mane.”

“Quite correct. Now here are ten shillings in addition as a small present, as I am a new comer.”

Bathsheba blushed slightly as she spoke at the sense of being generous in public, and Henery Fray, who had drawn up towards her chair, lifted his eyebrows and fingers to express amazement on a small scale.

“How much do I owe you—that man in the corner—what’s your name?” continued Bathsheba.

“Matthew Moon, ma’am,” said a singular framework of clothes with nothing of any consequence inside them, which advanced with the toes in no definite direction forwards, but turned in or out as they chanced to swing.

“Matthew Mark, did you say?—speak out—I shall not hurt you,” enquired the young farmer, kindly.

“Matthew Moon, mem,” said Henery Fray,

correctingly from behind her chair, to which point he had edged himself.

"Matthew Moon," murmured Bathsheba, turning her bright eyes to the book. "Ten and two-pence halfpenny is the sum put down to you, I see?"

"Yes, mis'ess," said Matthew, as the rustle of wind among dead leaves.

"Here it is, and ten shillings. Now the next—Andrew Candle, you are a new man, I hear. How came you to leave your last farm?"

"P-p-p-p-p-pl-pl-pl-l-l-l-ease, ma'am, p-p-p-p-pl-pl-pl-please ma'am-please'm-please'm—"

"'A's a stammering man, mem," said Henery Fray in an undertone, "and they turned him away because the only time he ever did speak plain he said his soul was his own, and other iniquities, to the squire. 'A can cuss, mem, as well as you or I, but 'a can't speak a common speech to save his life."

"Andrew Candle, here's yours—finish thanking me in a day or two. Temperance Miller—oh, here's another, Soberness, both women, I suppose?"

"Yes'm. Here we be, 'a b'lieve," was echoed in shrill unison.

"What have you been doing?"

"Tending thrashing-machine, and wimbling haybonds, and saying 'Hoosh!' to the cocks and

hens when they go upon your seeds, and planting Early Flourballs and Thompson's Wonderfuls with a dibble."

"Yes—I see. Are they satisfactory women?" she inquired softly of Henery Fray.

"Oh, mem—don't ask me! Yielding women—as scarlet a pair as ever was!" groaned Henery under his breath.

"Sit down."

"Who, mem?"

"Sit down!"

Joseph Poorgrass, in the background, twitched, and his lips became dry with fear of some terrible consequences as he saw Bathsheba summarily speaking, and Henery slinking off to a corner.

"Now the next. Laban Tall. You'll stay on working for me?"

"For you or anybody that pays me well, ma'am," replied the young married man.

"True—the man must live!" said a woman in the back quarter, who had just entered with clicking pattens.

"What woman is that?" Bathsheba asked.

"I be his lawful wife!" continued the voice with greater prominence of manner and tone. This lady called herself five-and-twenty, looked thirty, passed as thirty-five, and was forty. She was a woman who never, like some newly married,

showed conjugal tenderness in public, perhaps because she had none to show.

"Oh, you are," said Bathsheba. "Well, Laban, will you stay on?"

"Yes, he'll stay, ma'am!" said again the shrill tongue of Laban's lawful wife.

"Well, he can speak for himself, I suppose?"

"Oh, Lord, no, ma'am. A simple tool. Well enough, but a poor gawkhammer mortal," the wife replied.

"Heh-heh-heh!" laughed the married man with a hideous effort of appreciation, for he was as irrepressibly good-humoured under ghastly snubs as a parliamentary candidate on the hustings.

The names remaining were called in the same manner.

"Now I think I have done with you," said Bathsheba, closing the book and shaking back a stray twine of hair. "Has William Smallbury returned?"

"No, ma'am."

"The new shepherd will want a man under him," suggested Henery Fray, trying to make himself official again by a sideway approach towards her chair.

"Oh—he will. Who can he have?"

"Young Cain Ball is a very good lad," Henery said, "and Shepherd Oak don't mind his youth?"

he added, turning with an apologetic smile to the shepherd, who had just appeared on the scene, and was now leaning against the doorpost with his arms folded.

"Oh, I don't mind that," said Gabriel.

"How did Cain come by such a name?" asked Bathsheba.

"Oh you see, mem, his pore mother, not being a Scripture-read woman, made a mistake at his christening, thinking 'twas Abel killed Cain, and called en Cain, meaning Abel all the time. The parson put it right, but 'twas too late, for the name could never be got rid of in the parish. 'Tis very unfortunate for the boy."

"It is rather unfortunate."

"Yes. However, we soften it down as much as we can, and call him Cainy. Ah, pore widow-woman! she cried her heart out about it almost. She was brought up by a very heathen father and mother, who never sent her to church or school, and it shows how the sins of the parents are visited upon the children, mem."

Mr. Fray here drew up his features to the mild degree of melancholy required when the persons involved in the given misfortune do not belong to your own family.

"Very well, then, Cainy Ball to be under-shepherd. And you quite understand your duties?—you I mean, Gabriel Oak."

"Quite well, I thank you, Miss Everdene," said Shepherd Oak from the doorpost. "If I don't, I'll inquire." Gabriel was rather staggered by the remarkable coolness of her manner. Certainly nobody without previous information would ever have dreamt that Oak and the handsome woman before whom he stood had ever been other than strangers. But perhaps her air was the inevitable result of the social rise which had advanced her from a cottage to a large house and fields. The case is not unexampled in high places. When, in the writings of the later poets, Jove and his family are found to have moved from their cramped quarters on the peak of Olympus into the wide sky above it their words show a proportionate increase of arrogance and reserve.

Footsteps were heard in the passage, combining in their character the qualities both of weight and measure, rather at the expense of velocity.

(All.) "Here's Billy Smallbury come from Casterbridge."

"And what's the news?" said Bathsheba, as William, after marching to the middle of the hall, took a handkerchief from his hat and wiped his forehead from its centre to its remoter boundaries.

"I should have been sooner, miss," he said, "if it hadn't been for the weather." He then stamped with each foot severely, and on looking down his boots were perceived to be clogged with snow.

"Come at last, is it?" said Henery.

"Well, what about Fanny?" said Bathsheba.

"Well, ma'am, in round numbers, she's run away with the soldiers," said William.

"No; not a steady girl like Fanny!"

"I'll tell ye all particulars. When I got to Casterbridge Barracks, they said, 'The 11th Dragoon-Guards be gone away, and new troops have come.' The Eleventh left last week for Melchester. The Route came from Government like a thief in the night, as is his nature to, and afore the Eleventh knew it almost, they were on the march."

Gabriel had listened with interest. "I saw them go," he said.

"Yes," continued William, "they pranced down the street playing 'The Girl I Left Behind Me,' so 'tis said, in glorious notes of triumph. Every looker-on's inside shook with the blows of the great drum to his deepest vitals, and there was not a dry eye throughout the town among the public-house people and the nameless women!"

"But they're not gone to any war?"

"No, ma'am; but they be gone to take the places of them who may, which is very close connected. And so I said to myself, Fanny's young man was one of the regiment, and she's gone after him. There, ma'am, that's it in black and white."

"Did you find out his name?"

"No; nobody knew it. I believe he was higher in rank than a private."

Gabriel remained musing and said nothing, for he was in doubt.

"Well, we are not likely to know more to-night, at any rate," said Bathsheba. "But one of you had better run across to Farmer Boldwood's and tell him that much."

She then rose; but before retiring, addressed a few words to them with a pretty dignity, to which her mourning dress added a soberness that was hardly to be found in the words themselves.

"Now mind, you have a mistress instead of a master. I don't yet know my powers or my talents in farming; but I shall do my best, and if you serve me well, so shall I serve you. Don't any unfair ones among you (if there are any such, but I hope not) suppose that because I'm a woman I don't understand the difference between bad goings-on and good."

(All.) "No'm!"

(Liddy.) "Excellent well said."

"I shall be up before you are awake; I shall be afield before you are up; and I shall have break-fasted before you are afield. In short, I shall astonish you all."

(All.) "Yes'm!"

“And so good-night.”

(All.) “Good-night, ma’am.”

Then this small thesmothete stepped from the table, and surged out of the hall, her black silk dress licking up a few staws and dragging them along with a scratching noise upon the floor. Liddy, elevating her feelings to the occasion from a sense of grandeur, floated off behind Bathsheba with a milder dignity not entirely free from travesty, and the door was closed.

CHAPTER XI.

MELCHESTER MOOR—SNOW—A MEETING.

FOR dreariness, nothing could surpass a prospect in the outskirts of the city of Melchester at a later hour on this same snowy evening—if that may be called a prospect of which the chief constituent was darkness.

It was a night when sorrow may come to the brightest without causing any great sense of incongruity: when, with impressible persons, love becomes solicitousness, hope sinks to misgiving, and faith to hope: when the exercise of memory does not stir feelings of regret at opportunities for ambition that have been passed by, and anticipation does not prompt to enterprise.

The scene was a public path, bordered on the left hand by a river, behind which rose a high wall. On the right was a tract of land, partly meadow and partly moor, reaching, at its remote verge, to a wide undulating heath.

The changes of the seasons are less obtrusive on

spots of this kind than amid woodland scenery. Still, to a close observer, they are just as perceptible; the difference is that their media of manifestation are less trite and familiar than such well-known ones as the bursting of the buds or the fall of the leaf. Many are not so stealthy and gradual as we may be apt to imagine in considering the general torpidity of a moor or heath. Winter, in coming to the place under notice, advanced in some such well-marked stages as the following:—

The retreat of the snakes.

The transformation of the ferns.

The filling of the pools.

A rising of fogs.

The embrowning by frost.

The collapse of the fungi.

An obliteration by snow.

This climax of the series had been reached to-night on Melchester Moor, and for the first time in the season its irregularities were forms without features; suggestive of anything, proclaiming nothing, and without more character than that of being the limit of something else—the lowest layer of a firmament of snow. From this chaotic sky-full of crowding flakes the heath and moor momentarily received additional clothing, only to appear momentarily more naked thereby.

The vast dome of cloud above was strangely low, and formed as it were the roof of a large dark cavern, gradually sinking in upon its floor; for the instinctive thought was that the snow lining the heavens and that encrusting the earth would soon unite into one mass without any intervening stratum of air at all.

We turn our attention to the left-hand characteristics. They were flatness as regards the river, verticality as regards the wall behind it, and darkness as regards both. These features made up the mass. If anything could be darker than the sky, it was the wall; if anything could be gloomier than the wall, it was the river beneath. The indistinct summit of the façade was notched and pronged by chimneys here and there, and upon its face were faintly signified the oblong shapes of windows, though only in the upper part. Below, down to the water's edge, the flat was unbroken by hole or projection.

An indescribable succession of dull blows, perplexing in their regularity, sent their sound with difficulty through the fluffy atmosphere. It was a neighbouring clock striking ten. The bell was in the open air, and being overlaid with several inches of muffling snow, had lost its voice for the time.

About this hour the snow abated: ten flakes fell where twenty had fallen, then one had the room of

ten. Not long after a form moved by the brink of the river.

By its outline upon the colourless background, a close observer might have seen that it was small. This was all that was positively discoverable. Human it seemed.

The shape went slowly along, but without much exertion, for the snow, though sudden, was not as yet more than two inches deep. At this time some words were spoken aloud :—

“One. Two. Three. Four. Five.”

Between each utterance the little shape advanced about half a dozen yards. It was evident now that the windows high in the wall were being counted. The word “Five” represented the fifth window from the end of the wall.

Here the spot stopped, and dwindled small. The figure was stooping. Then a morsel of snow flew across the river towards the fifth window. It smacked against the wall at a point several yards from its mark. The throw was the idea of a man conjoined with the execution of a woman. No man who had ever seen bird, rabbit, or squirrel in his childhood, could possibly have thrown with such utter imbecility as was shown here.

Another attempt, and another; till by degrees the wall must have become pimpled with the adhering lumps of snow. At last one fragment struck the fifth window.

The river would have been seen by day to be of that deep smooth sort which races middle and sides with the same gliding precision, any irregularities of speed being immediately corrected by a small whirlpool. Nothing was heard in reply to the signal but the gurgle and cluck of one of these invisible wheels—together with a few small sounds which a sad man would have called moans, and a happy man laughter—caused by the flapping of the waters against trifling objects in other parts of the stream.

The window was struck again in the same manner.

Then a noise was heard, apparently produced by the opening of the window. This was followed by a voice from the same quarter.

“Who’s there?”

The tones were masculine, and not those of surprise. The high wall being that of a barrack, and marriage being looked upon with disfavour in the army, assignations and communications had probably been made across the river before to-night.

“Is it Sergeant Troy?” said the blurred spot in the snow, tremulously.

This person was so much like a mere shade upon the earth, and the other speaker so much a part of the building, that one would have said the wall was holding converse with the snow.

"Yes," came suspiciously from the shadow.
"What girl are you?"

"Oh, Frank—don't you know me?" said the spot. "Your wife, Fanny Robin."

"Fanny!" said the wall, in utter astonishment.

"Yes," said the girl, with a half-suppressed gasp of emotion.

There was a tone in the woman which is not that of the wife, and there was a manner in the man which is rarely a husband's. The dialogue went on.

"How did you come here?"

"I asked which was your window. Forgive me!"

"I did not expect you to-night. Indeed, I did not think you would come at all. It was a wonder you found me here. I am orderly to-morrow."

"You said I was to come."

"Well—I said that you might."

"Yes, I mean that I might. You are glad to see me, Frank?"

"Oh yes—of course."

"Can you—come to me!"

"My dear Fan, no! The bugle has sounded, the barrack gates are closed, and I have no leave. We are all of us as good as in Melchester Gaol till to-morrow morning."

"Then I shan't see you till then!" The words were in a faltering tone of disappointment.

"How did you get here from Weatherbury?"

"I walked—some part of the way—the rest by the carrier."

"I am surprised."

"Yes—so am I. And Frank, when will it be?"

"What?"

"That you promised."

"I don't quite recollect."

"Oh you do! Don't speak like that. It weighs me to the earth. It makes me say what ought to be said first by you."

"Never mind—say it."

"Oh, must I?—it is, when shall we be married, Frank?"

"Oh, I see. Well—you have to get proper clothes."

"I have money. Will it be by banns or license?"

"Banns, I should think."

"And we live in two parishes."

"Do we? What then?"

"My lodgings are in St. Mary's, and this is not. So they will have to be published in both."

"Is that the law?"

"Yes. Oh, Frank—you think me forward, I

am afraid! Don't, dear Frank—will you—for I love you so. And you said lots of times you would marry me, and—and—I—I—I——”

“Don't cry, now! It is foolish. If I said so, of course I will.”

“And shall I put up the banns in my parish, and will you in yours?”

“Yes.”

“To-morrow?”

“Not to-morrow. We'll settle in a few days.”

“You have the permission of the officers?”

“No—not yet.”

“Oh—how is it? You said you almost had before you left Casterbridge.”

“The fact is, I forgot to ask. Your coming like this is so sudden and unexpected.”

“Yes—yes—it is. It was wrong of me to worry you. I'll go away now. Will you come and see me to-morrow, at Mrs. Twills's, in North Street? I don't like to come to the Barracks. There are bad women about, and they think me one.”

“Quite so. I'll come to you, my dear. Good-night.”

“Good-night, Frank—good-night!”

And the noise was again heard of a window closing. The little spot moved away. When she passed the corner a subdued exclamation was heard inside the wall.

"Ho—ho—Sergeant—ho—ho!" An expostulation followed, but it was indistinct; and it became lost amid a low peal of laughter, which was hardly distinguishable from the gurgle of the tiny whirlpools outside.

CHAPTER XII.

FARMERS—A RULE—AN EXCEPTION.

THE first public evidence of Bathsheba's decision to be a farmer in her own person and by proxy no more was her appearance the following market-day in the corn-market at Casterbridge.

The low though extensive hall, supported by Tuscan pillars, and latterly dignified by the name of Corn-Exchange, was thronged with hot men who talked among each other in twos and threes, the speaker of the minute looking sideways into his auditor's face and concentrating his argument by a contraction of one eyelid during delivery. The greater number carried in their hands ground-ash saplings, using them partly as walking-sticks and partly for poking up pigs, sheep, neighbours with their backs turned, and restful things in general, which seemed to require such treatment in the course of their peregrinations. During conversations each subjected his sapling to great varieties of usage—bending it round his back,

forming an arch of it between his two hands, overweighting it on the ground till it reached nearly a semi-circle; or perhaps it was hastily tucked under the arm whilst the sample-bag was pulled forth and a handful of corn poured into the palm, which, after criticism, was flung upon the floor, an issue of events perfectly well known to half a dozen acute town-bred fowls which had as usual crept into the building unobserved, and waited the fulfilment of their anticipations with a high-stretched neck and oblique eye.

Among these heavy yeomen a feminine figure glided, the single one of her sex that the room contained. She was prettily and even daintily dressed. She moved between them as a chaise between carts, was heard after them as a romance after sermons, was felt among them like a breeze among furnaces. It had required a little determination—far more than she had at first imagined—to take up a position here, for at her first entry the lumbering dialogues had ceased, nearly every face had been turned towards her, and those that were already turned rigidly fixed there.

Two or three only of the farmers were personally known to Bathsheba, and to these she had made her way. But if she was to be the practical woman she had intended to show herself, business

must be carried on, introductions or none, and she ultimately acquired confidence enough to speak and reply boldly to men merely known to her by hearsay. Bathsheba too had her sample-bags, and by degrees adopted the professional pour into the hand—holding up the grains in her narrow palm for inspection, in perfect Casterbridge manner.

Something in the exact arch of her upper unbroken row of teeth, and in the keenly pointed corners of her red mouth when, with parted lips, she somewhat defiantly turned up her face to argue a point with a tall man, suggested that there was depth enough in that lithe slip of humanity for alarming potentialities of exploit, and daring enough to carry them out. But her eyes had a softness—invariably a softness—which, had they not been dark, would have seemed mistiness; as they were, it lowered an expression that might have been piercing to simple clearness.

Strange to say of a female in full bloom and vigour, she always allowed her interlocutors to finish their statements before rejoining with hers. In arguing on prices, she held to her own firmly, as was natural in a dealer, and reduced theirs persistently, as was inevitable in a woman. But there was an elasticity in her firmness which

removed it from obstinacy, as there was a naïveté in her cheapening which saved it from meanness.

Those of the farmers with whom she had no dealings (by far the greater part) were continually asking each other, “Who is she?” The reply would be,—

“ Farmer Everdene’s niece ; took on Weatherbury Upper Farm ; turned away the baily, and swears she’ll do everything herself.”

The other man would then shake his head.

“ Yes, ‘tis a pity she’s so headstrong,” the first would say. “ But we ought to be proud of her here—she lightens up the old place. ‘Tis such a shapely maid, however, that she’ll soon get picked up.”

It would be ungallant to suggest that the novelty of her engagement in such an occupation had almost as much to do with the magnetism as had the beauty of her face and movements. However, the interest was general, and this Saturday’s *début* in the forum, whatever it may have been to Bathsheba as the buying and selling farmer, was unquestionably a triumph to her as the maiden. Indeed, the sensation was so pronounced that her instinct on two or three occasions was to merely walk as a queen among these gods of the fallow, like a little sister of a little Jove, and to neglect closing prices altogether.

The numerous evidences of her power to attract were only thrown into greater relief by a marked exception. Women seem to have eyes in their ribbons for such matters as these. Bathsheba, without looking within a right angle of him, was conscious of a black sheep among the flock.

It perplexed her first. If there had been a respectable minority on either side, the case would have been most natural. If nobody had regarded her, she would have taken the matter indifferently—such cases had occurred. If everybody, this man included, she would have taken it as a matter of course—people had done so before. But the exception, added to its smallness, made the mystery—just as when the difference between the state of an insignificant fleece and the state of all around it, rather than any novelty in the states themselves, arrested the attention of Gideon.

She soon knew thus much of the recusant's appearance. He was a gentlemanly man, with full and distinctly outlined Roman features, the prominences of which glowed in the sun with a bronze-like richness of tone. He was erect in attitude, and quiet in demeanour. One characteristic pre-eminently marked him—dignity.

Apparently he had some time ago reached that entrance to middle age at which a man's aspect

naturally ceases to alter for the term of a dozen years or so ; and, artificially, a woman's does likewise. Thirty-five and fifty were his limits of variation—he might have been either, or anywhere between the two.

It may be said that married men of forty are usually ready and generous enough to fling passing glances at any specimen of moderate beauty they may discern by the way. Probably, as with persons playing whist for love, the consciousness of a certain immunity under any circumstances from that worst possible ultimate, the having to pay, makes them unduly speculative. Bathsheba was convinced that this unmoved person was not a married man.

When marketing was over, she rushed off to Liddy, who was waiting for her beside the yellow gig in which they had driven to town. The horse was put in, and on they trotted—Bathsheba's sugar, tea, and drapery parcels being packed behind, and expressing in some indescribable manner, by their colour, shape, and general lineaments, that they were that young lady-farmer's property, and the grocer's and draper's no more.

“ I've been through it, Liddy, and it is over. I sha'n't mind it again, for they will all have grown accustomed to seeing me there ; but this morning it was as bad as being married—eyes everywhere ! ”

"I knowed it would be," Liddy said. "Men be such a terrible class of society to look at a body."

"But there was one man who had more sense than to waste his time upon me." The information was put in this form that Liddy might not for a moment suppose her mistress was at all piqued. "A very good-looking man," she continued, "upright; about forty, I should think. Do you know at all who he could be?"

Liddy couldn't think.

"Can't you guess at all?" said Bathsheba with some disappointment.

"I haven't a notion; besides, 'tis no difference, since he took less notice of you than any of the rest. Now, if he'd taken more, it would have mattered a great deal."

Bathsheba was suffering from the reverse feeling just then, and they bowled along in silence. A low carriage, bowling along still more rapidly behind a horse of unimpeachable breed, overtook and passed them.

"Why, there he is!" she said.

Liddy looked. "That! That's Farmer Boldwood—of course 'tis—the man you couldn't see the other day when he called."

"Oh, Farmer Boldwood," murmured Bathsheba, and looked at him as he outstripped them. The

farmer had never turned his head once, but with eyes fixed on the most advanced point along the road, passed as unconsciously and abstractedly as if Bathsheba and her charms were thin air.

"He's an interesting man—don't you think so?" she remarked.

"Oh yes, very. Everybody owns it," replied Liddy.

"I wonder why he is so wrapt up and indifferent, and seemingly so far away from all he sees around him."

"It is said—but not known for certain—that he met with some bitter disappointment when he was a young man and merry. A woman jilted him, they say."

"People always say that—and we know very well women scarcely ever jilt men; 'tis the men who jilt us. I expect it is simply his nature to be so reserved."

"Simply his nature—I expect so, miss—nothing else in the world."

"Still, 'tis more romantic to think he has been served cruelly, poor thing! Perhaps, after all, he has."

"Depend upon it he has. Oh yes, miss, he has. I feel he must have."

"However, we are very apt to think extremes of people. I shouldn't wonder after all if it

wasn't a little of both—just between the two—rather cruelly used and rather reserved."

"Oh dear no, miss—I can't think it between the two!"

"That's most likely."

"Well, yes, so it is. I am convinced it is most likely. You may take my word, miss, that that's what's the matter with him."

CHAPTER XIII.

SORTES SANCTORUM—THE VALENTINE.

It was Sunday afternoon in the farm-house, on the thirteenth of February. Dinner being over, Bathsheba, for want of a better companion, had asked Liddy to come and sit with her. The mouldy pile was dreary in winter-time before the candles were lighted and the shutters closed ; the atmosphere of the place seemed as old as the walls ; every nook behind the furniture had a temperature of its own, for the fire was not kindled in this part of the house early in the day ; and Bathsheba's new piano, which was an old one in other annals, looked particularly sloping and out of level on the warped floor before night threw a shade over its less prominent angles and hid the unpleasantness. Liddy, like a little brook, though shallow, was always rippling ; her presence had not so much weight as to task thought, and yet enough to exercise it.

On the table lay an old quarto Bible, bound in leather. Liddy looking at it said,—

“Did you ever find out, miss, who you are going to marry by means of the Bible and key?”

“Don’t be so foolish, Liddy. As if such things could be.”

“Well, there’s a good deal in it, all the same.”

“Nonsense, child.”

“And it makes your heart beat fearfully. Some believe in it; some don’t; I do.”

“Very well, let’s try it,” said Bathsheba, bounding from her seat with that total disregard of consistency which can be indulged in towards a dependent, and entering into the spirit of divination at once. “Go and get the front door key.”

Liddy fetched it. “I wish it wasn’t Sunday,” she said, on returning. “Perhaps ‘tis wrong.”

“What’s right week days is right Sundays,” replied her companion in a tone which was a proof in itself.

The book was opened—the leaves, drab with age, being quite worn away at much-read verses by the forefingers of unpractised readers in former days, where they were moved along under the line as an aid to the vision. The special verse in the Book of Ruth was sought out by Bathsheba, and the sublime words met her eye. They slightly



"GET THE FRONT DOOR KEY." LIDDY FETCHED IT.

thrilled and abashed her. It was Wisdom in the abstract facing Folly in the concrete. Folly in the concrete blushed, persisted in her intention, and placed the key on the book. A rusty patch immediately upon the verse, caused by previous pressure of an iron substance thereon, told that this was not the first time the old volume had been used for the purpose.

"Now keep steady, and be silent," said Bathsheba.

The verse was repeated; the book turned round; Bathsheba blushed guiltily.

"Who did you try?" said Liddy curiously.

"I shall not tell you."

"Did you notice Mr. Boldwood's doings in church this morning, miss?" Liddy continued, adumbrating by the remark the track her thoughts had taken.

"No, indeed," said Bathsheba, with serene indifference.

"His pew is exactly opposite yours, miss."

"I know it."

"And you did not see his goings on?"

"Certainly I did not, I tell you."

Liddy assumed a smaller physiognomy, and shut her lips decisively.

This move was unexpected, and proportionately disconcerting. "What did he do?" Bathsheba said perforce.

"Didn't turn his head to look at you once all the service."

"Why should he?" again demanded her mistress, wearing a nettled look. "I didn't ask him to."

"Oh no. But everybody else was noticing you; and it was odd he didn't. There, 'tis like him. Rich and gentlemanly, what does he care?"

Bathsheba dropped into a silence intended to express that she had opinions on the matter too abstruse for Liddy's comprehension, rather than that she had nothing to say.

"Dear me—I had nearly forgotten the valentine I bought yesterday," she exclaimed at length.

"Valentine! who for, miss?" said Liddy. "Farmer Boldwood?"

It was the single name among all possible wrong ones that just at this moment seemed to Bathsheba more pertinent than the right.

"Well, no. It is only for little Teddy Coggan. I have promised him something, and this will be a pretty surprise for him. Liddy, you may as well bring me my desk and I'll direct it at once."

Bathsheba took from her desk a gorgeously illuminated and embossed design in post-octavo, which had been bought on the previous market-day at the chief stationer's in Casterbridge. In the centre was a small oval enclosure; this was left

blank, that the sender might insert tender words more appropriate to the special occasion than any generalities by a printer could possibly be.

"Here is a place for writing," said Bathsheba.
"What shall I put?"

"Something of this sort, I should think," returned Liddy promptly:—

"The rose is red,
The violet blue,
Carnation's sweet,
And so are you."

"Yes, that shall be it. It just suits itself to a chubby-faced child like him," said Bathsheba. She inserted the words in a small though legible handwriting; enclosed the sheet in an envelope, and dipped her pen for the direction.

"What fun it would be to send it to the stupid old Boldwood, and how he would wonder!" said the irrepressible Liddy, lifting her eyebrows, and indulging in an awful mirth on the verge of fear as she thought of the moral and social magnitude of the man contemplated.

Bathsheba paused to regard the idea at full length. Boldwood's had begun to be a troublesome image—a species of Daniel in her kingdom who persisted in kneeling eastward when reason and common sense said that he might just as well follow suit with the rest, and afford her the

official glance of admiration which cost nothing at all. She was far from being seriously concerned about his non-conformity. Still, it was faintly depressing that the most dignified and valuable man in the parish should withhold his eyes, and that a girl like Liddy should talk about it. So Liddy's idea was at first rather harassing than piquant.

"No, I won't do that. He wouldn't see any humour in it."

"He'd worry to death," said the persistent Liddy.

"Really, I don't care particularly to send it to Teddy," remarked her mistress. "He's rather a naughty child sometimes."

"Yes—that he is."

"Let's toss, as men do," said Bathsheba, idly. "Now then, head, Boldwood; tail, Teddy. No, we won't toss money on a Sunday, that would be tempting the devil indeed."

"Toss this hymn-book; there can't be no sinfulness in that, miss."

"Very well. Open, Boldwood—shut, Teddy. No; it's more likely to fall open. Open, Teddy—shut, Boldwood."

The book went fluttering in the air and came down shut.

Bathsheba, a small yawn upon her mouth, took

the pen, and with off-hand serenity directed the missive to Boldwood.

"Now light a candle, Liddy. Which seal shall we use? Here's a unicorn's head—there's nothing in that. What's this?—two doves—no. It ought to be something extraordinary, ought it not, Lidd? Here's one with a motto—I remember it is some funny one, but I can't read it. We'll try this, and if it doesn't do we'll have another."

A large red seal was duly affixed. Bathsheba looked closely at the hot wax to discover the words.

"Capital!" she exclaimed, throwing down the letter frolicsomely. "'Twould upset the solemnity of a parson and clerk too."

Liddy looked at the words of the seal, and read—

"*Marry me.*"

The same evening the letter was sent, and was duly sorted in Casterbridge post-office that night, to be returned to Weatherbury again in the morning.

So very idly and unreflectingly was this deed done. Of love as a spectacle Bathsheba had a fair knowledge; but of love subjectively she knew nothing.

CHAPTER XIV.

EFFECT OF THE LETTER—SUNRISE.

At dusk, on the evening of St. Valentine's Day, Boldwood sat down to supper as usual, by a beaming fire of aged logs. Upon the mantel-shelf before him was a time-piece, surmounted by a spread eagle, and upon the eagle's wings was the letter Bathsheba had sent. Here the bachelor's gaze was continually fastening itself, till the large red seal became as a blot of blood on the retina of his eye; and as he eat and drank he still read in fancy the words thereon, although they were too remote for his sight,—

“*Marry me.*”

The pert injunction was like those crystal substances which, colourless themselves, assume the tone of objects about them. Here, in the quiet of Boldwood's parlour, where everything that was not grave was extraneous, and where the atmosphere was that of a Puritan Sunday lasting all the week, the letter and its dictum changed their tenor from

the thoughtlessness of their origin to a deep solemnity, imbibed from their accessories now.

Since the receipt of the missive in the morning, Boldwood had felt the spherical completeness of his existence heretofore to be slowly spreading into an abnormal distortion in the particular direction of an ideal passion. The disturbance was as the first floating weed to Columbus—the contemptibly little suggesting possibilities of the infinitely great.

The letter must have had an origin and a motive. That the latter was of the smallest magnitude compatible with its existence at all, Boldwood, of course, did not know. And such an explanation did not strike him as a possibility even. It is foreign to a mystified condition of mind to realize of the mystifier that the very dissimilar processes of approving a course suggested by circumstance, and striking out a course from inner impulse and intention purely, would look the same in the result. The vast difference between starting a train of events, and directing into a particular groove a series already started, is rarely apparent to the person confounded by the issue.

When Boldwood went to bed, he placed the valentine in the corner of the looking-glass. He was conscious of its presence, even when his back was turned upon it. It was the first time in Bold-

wood's life that such an event had occurred. The same fascination that caused him to think it an act which had a deliberate motive prevented him from regarding it as an impertinence. He looked again at the direction. The mysterious influences of night invested the writing with the presence of the unknown writer. Somebody's—some *woman's*—hand had travelled softly over the paper bearing his name : her unrevealed eyes had watched every curve as she formed it : her brain had seen him in imagination the while. Why should she have imagined him ? Her mouth—were the lips red or pale, plump or creased?—had curved itself to a certain expression as the pen went on—the corners had moved with all their natural tremulousness : what had been the expression ?

The vision of the woman writing, as a supplement to the words written, had no individuality. She was a misty shape, and well she might be, considering that her original was at that moment sound asleep and oblivious of all love and letter-writing under the sky. Whenever Boldwood dozed she took a form, and comparatively ceased to be a vision : when he awoke there was the letter justifying the dream.

The moon shone to-night, and its light was not of a customary kind. His window only admitted

a reflection of its rays, and the pale sheen had that reversed direction which snow gives, coming upward and lighting up his ceiling in a phenomenal way, casting shadows in strange places, and putting lights where shadows had used to be.

The substance of the epistle had occupied him but little in comparison with the fact of its arrival. He suddenly wondered if anything more might be found in the envelope than what he had withdrawn. He jumped out of bed in the weird light, took the letter, pulled out the flimsy sheet, shook the envelope—searched it. Nothing more was there. Boldwood looked, as he had a hundred times the preceding day, at the insistent red seal: “Marry me,” he said aloud.

The solemn and reserved yeoman again closed the letter, and stuck it in the frame of the glass. In doing so he caught sight of his reflected features, wan in expression, and insubstantial in form. He saw how closely compressed was his mouth, and that his eyes were wide-spread and vacant. Feeling uneasy and dissatisfied with himself for this nervous excitability, he returned to bed.

Then the dawn drew on. The full power of the clear heaven was not equal to that of a cloudy sky at noon, when Boldwood arose and dressed himself. He descended the stairs and went out

towards the gate of a field to the east, leaning over which he paused and looked around.

It was one of the usual slow sunrises of this time of the year, and the sky, pure violet in the zenith, was leaden to the northward, and murky to the east, where, over the snowy down or ewe-lease on Weatherbury Upper Farm, and apparently resting upon the ridge, the only half of the sun yet visible burnt incandescent and rayless, like a red and flameless fire shining over a white hearthstone. The whole effect resembled a sunset as childhood resembles age.

In other directions, the fields and sky were so much of one colour by the snow, that it was difficult in a hasty glance to tell whereabouts the horizon occurred; and in general there was here, too, that before-mentioned preternatural inversion of light and shade which attends the prospect when the garish brightness commonly in the sky is found on the earth, and the shades of earth are in the sky. Over the west hung the wasting moon, now dull and greenish-yellow, like tarnished brass.

Boldwood was listlessly noting how the frost had hardened and glazed the surface of the snow, till it shone in the red eastern light with the polish of marble; how, in some portions of the slope, withered grass-bents, encased in icicles, bristled

through the smooth wan coverlit in the twisted and curved shapes of old Venetian glass ; and how the footprints of a few birds, which had hopped over the snow whilst it lay in the state of a soft fleece were now frozen to a short permanency. A half-muffled noise of light wheels interrupted him. Boldwood turned back into the road. It was the mail-cart—a crazy, two-wheeled vehicle, hardly heavy enough to resist a puff of wind. The driver held out a letter. Boldwood seized it and opened it, expecting another anonymous one. So greatly are people's ideas of probability a mere sense that precedent will repeat itself, that they often do not stop to think whether the fact of an event having once occurred is not in many cases the very circumstance which makes its repetition unlikely.

"I don't think it is for you, sir," said the man, when he saw Boldwood's action. "Though there is no name, I think it is for your shepherd."

Boldwood looked then at the address :—

*To the New Shepherd,
Weatherbury Farm,
Near Casterbridge.*

"Oh—what a mistake!—it is not mine. Nor is it for my shepherd. It is for Miss Everdene's. You had better take it on to him—Gabriel Oak—and say I opened it in mistake."

At this moment, on the ridge, up against the blazing sky, a figure was visible, like the black snuff in the midst of a candle-flame. Then it moved and began to bustle about vigorously from place to place, carrying square skeleton masses, which were riddled by the same rays. A small figure on all fours followed behind. The tall form was that of Gabriel Oak; the small one that of George; the articles in course of transit were hurdles.

"Wait," said Boldwood. "That's the man on the hill. I'll take the letter to him myself."

To Boldwood it was now no longer merely a letter to another man. It was an opportunity. Exhibiting a face pregnant with intention, he entered the snowy field.

Gabriel, at that minute, descended the hill towards the right. The glow stretched down in this direction now, and touched the distant roof of Warren's Malthouse—whither the shepherd was apparently bent. Boldwood followed at a distance.

CHAPTER XV.

A MORNING MEETING—THE LETTER AGAIN.

THE scarlet and orange light outside the malt-house did not penetrate to its interior, which was, as usual, lighted by a rival glow of similar hue, radiating from the hearth.

The maltster, after having lain down in his clothes for a few hours, was now sitting beside a three-legged table, breakfasting off bread and bacon. This was eaten on the plateless system, which is performed by placing a slice of bread upon the table, the meat flat upon the bread, a mustard plaster upon the meat, and a pinch of salt upon the whole, then cutting them vertically downwards with a large pocket-knife till wood is reached, when the severed lump is impaled on the knife, elevated, and sent the proper way of food. The maltster's lack of teeth appeared not to sensibly diminish his powers as a mill. He had been without them for so many years that toothlessness was felt less to be a defect than hard

gums an acquisition. Indeed, he seemed to approach the grave as a hyperbolic curve approaches a line—sheering off as he got nearer, till it was doubtful if he would ever reach it at all.

In the ashpit was a heap of potatoes roasting, and a boiling pipkin of charred bread, called “coffee,” for the benefit of whomsoever should call, for Warren’s was a sort of village clubhouse, there being no inn in the place.

“I say, says I, we get a fine day, and then down comes a snapper at night,” was a remark now suddenly heard spreading into the malthouse from the door, which had been opened the previous moment, and the form of Henery Fray advanced to the fire, stamping the snow from his boots when about half-way there. The speech and entry had not seemed to be at all an abrupt beginning to the maltster, introductory matter being often omitted in this neighbourhood, both from word and deed, and the maltster having the same latitude allowed him, did not hurry to reply. He picked up a fragment of cheese, by pecking upon it with his knife, as a butcher picks up skewers.

Henery appeared in a drab kerseymere great-coat, buttoned over his smock-frock, the white skirts of the latter being visible to the distance of about a foot below the coat-tails, which, when you got used to the style of dress, looked natural

enough, and even ornamental—it certainly was comfortable.

Matthew Moon, Joseph Poorgrass, and other carters and waggoners followed at his heels, with great lanterns dangling from their hands, which showed that they had just come from the cart-horse stables, where they had been busily engaged since four o'clock that morning.

"And how is she getting on without a baily?" the maltster inquired.

Henery shook his head, and smiled one of the bitter smiles, dragging all the flesh of his forehead into a corrugated heap in the centre.

"She'll rue it—surely, surely!" he said. "Benjy Pennyways were not a true man or an honest baily—as big a betrayer as Joey Iscariot himself. But to think she can manage alone!" He allowed his head to swing laterally three or four times in silence. "Never in all my creeping up—never!"

This was recognized by all as the conclusion of some gloomy speech which had been expressed in thought alone during the shake of the head; Henery meanwhile retained several marks of despair upon his face, to imply that they would be required for use again directly he should go on speaking.

"All will be ruined, and ourselves too, or there's

no meat in gentlemen's houses!" said Mark Clark, in the manner of a man ready to burst all links of habit.

"A headstrong maid, that's what she is—and won't listen to no advice at all. Pride and vanity have ruined many a cobbler's dog. Dear, dear, when I think of it, I sorrows like a man in travel!"

"True, Henery, you do, I've heard ye," said Joseph Poorgrass, in a voice of thorough attestation, and with a wire-drawn smile of misery.

"Twould do a martel man no harm to have what's under her bonnet," said Billy Smallbury, who had just entered, bearing his one tooth before him. "She can spaik real language, and must have some sense somewhere. Do ye conceive me?"

"I do, I do; but no baily—I deserved that place," wailed Henery, signifying wasted genius by gazing blankly at visions of a high destiny apparently visible to him on Billy Smallbury's smock-frock. "There, 'twas to be, I suppose. Your lot is your lot, and Scripture is nothing; for if you do good you don't get rewarded according to your works, but are cheated in some mean way out of your recompense."

"No, no; I don't agree with'ee there," said Mark Clark, decisively. "God's a perfect gentleman in that respect."

"Good works good pay, so to speak it," attested Joseph Poorgrass.

A short pause ensued, and as a sort of *entr'acte* Henery turned and blew out the lanterns, which the increase of daylight rendered no longer necessary even in the malthouse, with its one pane of glass.

"I wonder what a farmer-woman can want with a harpsichord, dulcimer, pianner, or whatever 'tis they d'call it," said the maltster. "Liddy saith she've a new one."

"Got a pianner?"

"Ay. Seems her old uncle's things were not good enough for her. She've bought all but everything new. There's heavy chairs for the stout, weak and wiry ones for the slender; great watches, getting on to the size of clocks, to stand upon the chimbley-piece."

"Pictures, for the most part wonderful frames."

"Long horse-hair settles for the drunk, with horse-hair pillows at each end."

"Looking-glasses for the pretty."

"Lying books for the wicked."

A firm loud tread was now heard stamping outside; the door was opened about six inches, and somebody on the other side exclaimed,—

"Neighbours, have ye got room for a few newborn lambs?"

"Ay, sure, shepherd," said the conclave.

The door was flung back till it kicked the wall and trembled from top to bottom with the blow. Mr. Oak appeared in the entry with a steaming face, hay-bands wound about his ankles to keep out the snow, a leather strap round his waist outside the smock-frock, and looking altogether an epitome of the world's health and vigour. Four lambs hung in various embarrassing attitudes over his shoulders, and the dog George, which Gabriel had contrived to fetch from Norcombe, stalked solemnly behind.

"Well, Shepherd Oak, and how's lambing this year, if I may say it?" inquired Joseph Poorgrass.

"Terrible trying," said Oak. "I've been wet through twice a-day, either in snow or rain, this last fortnight. Cainy and I haven't tined our eyes to-night."

"A good few twins, too, I hear, so to speak it?"

"Too many by half. Yes; 'tis a very queer lambing this year. We sha'n't have done by Lady Day."

"And last year 'twere all over by Sexagesamine Sunday," Joseph remarked.

"Bring on the rest, Cain," said Gabriel, "and then run back to the ewes. I'll follow you soon."

Cainy Ball—a cherry-faced young lad, with a small circular orifice by way of mouth, advanced

and deposited two others, and retired as he was bidden. Oak lowered the lambs from their unnatural elevation, wrapped them in hay, and placed them round the fire.

"We've no lambing-hut here, as I used to have at Norcombe," said Gabriel, "and 'tis such a plague to bring the weakly ones to a house. If 'twasn't for your place here, maltster, I don't know what I should do, this keen weather. And how is it with you to-day, maltster?"

"Oh, neither sick nor sorry, shepherd; but no younger."

"Ay—I understand."

"Sit down, Shepherd Oak," continued the ancient man of malt. "And how was the old place at Norcombe when ye went for your dog? I should like to see the old familiar spot; but faith, I shouldn't know a soul there now."

"I suppose you wouldn't. 'Tis altered very much."

"Is it true that Dicky Hill's wooden cider-house is pulled down?"

"Oh yes—years ago, and Dicky's cottage just above it."

"Well, to be sure!"

"Yes; and Tompkins's old apple-tree is rooted that used to bear two hogsheads of cider with its own apples, and no help from other trees."

"Rooted?—you don't say it! Ah! stirring times we live in—stirring times."

"And you can mind the old well that used to be in the middle of the place? That's turned into a solid iron pump with a large stone trough, and all complete."

"Dear, dear—how the face of nations alter, and what great revolutions we live to see now-a-days! Yes—and 'tis the same here. They've been talking but now of the mis'ess's strange doings."

"What have you been saying about her?" inquired Oak, sharply turning to the rest, and getting very warm.

"These middle-aged men have been pulling her over the coals for pride and vanity," said Mark Clark; "but I say, let her have rope enough. Bless her pretty face—shouldn't I like to do so —upon her cherry lips!" The gallant Mark Clark here made a peculiar and well-known sound with his own.

"Mark," said Gabriel, sternly, "now you mind this: none of that dalliance-talk—that philandering way—that dandle-smack-and-coddle style of yours—about Miss Everdene. I don't allow it. Do you hear?"

"With all my heart, as the old woman said," replied Mr. Clark, heartily.

"I suppose you've been speaking against her?"

said Oak, turning to Joseph Poorgrass with a very grim look.

“No, no—not a word I—’tis a real joyful thing that she’s no worse, that’s what I say,” said Joseph, trembling and blushing with terror.
“Matthew just said——”

“Matthew Moon, what have you been saying?” asked Oak.

“I? Why ye know I wouldn’t harm a worm—no, not one underground worm!” said Matthew Moon, looking very uneasy.

“Well, somebody has—and look here, neighbours.” Gabriel, though one of the quietest and most gentle men on earth, rose to the occasion, with martial promptness and vigour. “That’s my fist.” Here he placed his fist, rather smaller in size than a common loaf, in the mathematical centre of the maltster’s little table, and with it gave a bump or two thereon, as if to ensure that their eyes all thoroughly took in the idea of fistiness before he went further. “Now—the first man in the parish that I hear prophesying bad of our mistress, why”—(here the fist was raised and let fall, as Thor might have done with his hammer in assaying it)—“he’ll smell and taste that—or I’m a Dutchman.”

All earnestly expressed by their features that their minds did not wander to Holland for a

moment on account of this statement, well knowing it was but a powerful form of speech ; but were deplored the difference which gave rise to the figure ; and Mark Clark cried “ Hear, hear, as the undertaker said.” The dog George looked up at the same time after the shepherd’s menace, and though he understood English but imperfectly, began to growl.

“ Now, don’t ye take on so, shepherd, and sit down ! ” said Henery, with a deprecating peacefulness equal to anything of the kind in Christianity.

“ We hear that ye be a extraordinary good and clever man, shepherd,” said Joseph Poorgrass with considerable anxiety from behind the maltster’s bedstead, whither he had retired for safety. “ ‘ Tis a great thing to be clever, I’m sure,” he added, making small movements associated with states of mind rather than body ; “ we wish we were, don’t we, neighbours ? ”

“ Ay, that we do, sure,” said Matthew Moon, with a small anxious laugh towards Oak, to show how very friendly disposed he was likewise.

“ Who’s been telling you I’m clever ? ” said Oak.

“ ‘ Tis blowed about from pillar to post quite common,” said Matthew. “ We hear that ye can tell the time as well by the stars as we can by the sun and moon, shepherd.”

"Yes, I can do a little that way," said Gabriel, as a man of medium sentiments on the subject.

"And that ye can make sun-dials, and prent folks' names upon their waggons almost like copper-plate, with beautiful flourishes, and great long tails. A excellent fine thing for ye to be such a clever man, shepherd. Joseph Poorgrass used to prent to Farmer James Everdene's waggons before you came, and 'a could never mind which way to turn the J's and E's—could ye, Joseph?" Joseph shook his head to express how absolute was the fact that he couldn't. "And so you used to do 'em the wrong way, like this, didn't ye, Joseph?" Matthew marked on the dusty floor with his whip-handle

LAMES.

"And how Farmer James would cuss, and call thee a fool, wouldn't he, Joseph, when 'a seed his name looking so inside-out-like?" continued Matthew Moon, with feeling.

"Ay—'a would," said Joseph, meekly. "But, you see, I wasn't so much to blame, for them J's and E's are such trying sons of dogs for the memory to mind whether they face backward or forward; and I always had such a forgetful memory, too."

"'Tis a very bad affliction for ye, Joseph Poor-

grass—being such a man of calamity in other ways.”

“Well, ’tis; but a happy Providence ordered that it should be no worse, and I feel my thanks. As to shepherd, there, I’m sure mis’ess ought to have made ye her baily—such a fitting man for’t as you be.”

“I don’t mind owning that I expected it,” said Oak, frankly. “Indeed, I hoped for the place. At the same time, Miss Everdene has a right to be her own baily if she chooses—and to keep me down to be a common shepherd only.” Oak drew a slow breath, looked sadly into the bright ashpit, and seemed lost in thoughts not of the most hopeful hue.

The genial warmth of the fire now began to stimulate the nearly lifeless lambs to bleat and move their limbs briskly upon the hay, and to recognize for the first time the fact that they were born. Their noise increased to a chorus of baas, upon which Oak pulled the milk-can from before the fire, and taking a small teapot from the pocket of his smock-frock, filled it with milk, and taught those of the helpless creatures which were not to be restored to their dams how to drink from the spout—a trick they acquired with astonishing aptitude.

“And she don’t even let ye have the skins of

the dead lambs, I hear?" resumed Joseph Poorgrass, his eyes lingering on the operations of Oak with the necessary melancholy.

"I don't have them," said Gabriel.

"Ye be very badly used, shepherd," hazarded Joseph again, in the hope of getting Oak as an ally in lamentation after all. "I think she's took against ye—that I do."

"Oh no—not at all," replied Gabriel, hastily, and a sigh escaped him, which the deprivation of lamb skins could hardly have caused.

Before any further remark had been added a shade darkened the door, and Boldwood entered the malthouse, bestowing around upon each a nod, of a quality between friendliness and condescension.

"Ah! Oak, I thought you were here," he said. "I met the mail-cart ten minutes ago, and a letter was put into my hand, which I opened without reading the address. I believe it is yours. You must excuse the accident, please."

"Oh yes—not a bit of difference, Mr. Boldwood—not a bit," said Gabriel, readily. He had not a correspondent on earth, nor was there a possible letter coming to him whose contents the whole parish would not have been welcome to peruse.

Oak stepped aside, and read the following in an unknown hand:—

"DEAR FRIEND,—I do not know your name, but I think these few lines will reach you, which I write to thank you for your kindness to me the night I left Weatherbury in a reckless way. I also return the money I owe you, which you will excuse my not keeping as a gift. All has ended well, and I am happy to say I am going to be married to the young man who has courted me for some time—Sergeant Troy, of the 11th Dragoon Guards, now quartered in Melchester. He would, I know, object to my having received anything except as a loan, being a man of great respectability and high honour—indeed, a nobleman by blood."

"I should be much obliged to you if you would keep the contents of this letter a secret for the present, dear friend. We mean to surprise Weatherbury by coming there soon as husband and wife, though I blush to state it to one nearly a stranger. The sergeant grew up in Weatherbury. Thanking you again for your kindness,

"I am, your sincere well-wisher,

"FANNY ROBIN."

"Have you read it, Mr. Boldwood?" said Gabriel; "if not, you had better do so. I know you are interested in Fanny Robin."

Boldwood read the letter and looked grieved.

"Fanny—poor Fanny! the end she is so con-

fident of has not yet come, she should remember—and may never come."

"What sort of a man is this Sergeant Troy?" said Gabriel.

"H'm—I am afraid not one to build much hope upon in such a case as this," the farmer murmured, "though he's a clever fellow, and up to everything. A slight romance attaches to him, too. His mother was a French governess, and it seems that a secret attachment existed between her and the late Lord Severn. Soon after she was married to a poor medical man, and while money was forthcoming all went on well. Unfortunately for her boy, his best friends died; and he got then a situation as second clerk at a lawyer's in Casterbridge.. He stayed there for some time, and might have worked himself into a dignified position of some sort had he not indulged in the wild freak of enlisting. I have much doubt if ever little Fanny will surprise us in the way she mentions—very much doubt. A silly girl—silly girl!"

The door was hurriedly burst open again, and in came running Cainy Ball out of breath, mouth red and open, like the bell of a penny trumpet, and coughing with noisy vigour and great distension of face.

"Now, Cain Ball," said Oak, sternly, "why will you run so fast and lose your breath so? I'm always telling you of it."

"Oh—I—A puff of mee breath—went—the wrong way, please, Mister Oak, and made me cough—hok—hok—hok!"

"Well—what have you come for?"

"I've run to tell ye," said the junior-shepherd, supporting his exhausted youthful frame against the doorpost, "that you must come directly. Two more ewes have twinned—that's what's the matter, Shepherd Oak."

"Oh, that's it," said Oak, jumping up, and dismissing for the present his thoughts on poor Fanny. "You are a good boy to run and tell me, Cain, and you shall smell a large plum-pudding some day as a treat. But, before we go, Cainy, bring the tarpot, and we'll mark this lot and have done with 'em."

Oak took from his illimitable pockets a marking iron, dipped it into the pot, and imprinted on the buttocks of the infant sheep the initials of her he delighted to muse on—"B. E.," which signified to all the region round that thenceforth the lambs belonged to farmer Bathsheba Everdene, and to no one else.

"Now, Cainy, shoulder your two, and off. Good morning, Mr. Boldwood." The shepherd lifted the sixteen large legs and four small bodies he had himself brought, and vanished with them in the direction of the lambing field hard by—their frames

being now in a sleek and hopeful state, pleasantly contrasting with their death's-door plight of half-an-hour before.

Boldwood followed him a little way up the field, hesitated, and turned back. He followed him again with a last resolve, annihilating return. On approaching the nook in which the fold was constructed, the farmer drew out his pocket-book, unfastened it, and allowed it to lie open on his hand. A letter was revealed—Bathsheba's.

"I was going to ask you, Oak," he said, with unreal carelessness, "if you know whose writing this is?"

Oak glanced into the book, and replied instantly, with a flushed face, "Miss Everdene's."

Oak had coloured simply at the consciousness of sounding her name. He now felt a strangely distressing qualm from a new thought. The letter could of course be no other than anonymous, or the inquiry would not have been necessary.

Boldwood mistook his confusion: sensitive persons are always ready with their "Is it I?" in preference to objective reasoning.

"The question was perfectly fair," he returned—and there was something incongruous in the serious earnestness with which he applied himself to an argument on a valentine. "You know it is always expected that privy inquiries will be made: that's

where the—fun lies.” If the word “fun” had been “torture,” it could not have been uttered with a more constrained and restless countenance than was Boldwood’s then.

Soon parting from Gabriel, the lonely and reserved man returned to his house to breakfast—feeling twinges of shame and regret at having so far exposed his mood by those fevered questions to a stranger. He again placed the letter on the mantelpiece, and sat down to think of the circumstances attending it by the light of Gabriel’s information.

CHAPTER XVI.

ALL SAINTS' AND ALL SOULS'.

ON a week-day morning a small congregation, consisting mainly of women and girls, rose from its knees in the mouldy nave of All Saints' Church, Melchester, at the end of a service without a sermon. They were about to disperse, when a smart footstep, entering the porch and coming up the central passage, arrested their attention. The step echoed with a ring unusual in a church ; it was the clink of spurs. Everybody looked. A young cavalry soldier in a red uniform, with the three chevrons of a sergeant upon his sleeve, strode up the aisle, with an embarrassment which was only the more accented by the intense vigour of his step, and by the determination upon his face to show none. A slight flush had mounted his cheek by the time he had run the gauntlet between these females ; but, passing on through the chancel arch, he never paused till he came close to the altar railing. Here for a moment he stood alone.

The officiating curate, who had not yet doffed his surplice, perceived the new-comer and followed him to the communion-space. He whispered to the soldier, and then beckoned to the clerk, who in his turn whispered to an elderly woman, apparently his wife, and they also went up the chancel steps.

“ ‘Tis a wedding !” murmured some of the women, brightening. “ Let’s wait ! ”

The majority again sat down.

There was a creaking of machinery behind, and some of the young ones turned their heads. From the interior face of the west wall of the tower projected a little canopy with a quater-jack and small bell beneath it, the automaton being driven by the same clock machinery that struck the large bell in the tower. Between the tower and the church was a close screen, the door of which was kept shut during services, hiding this grotesque clockwork from sight. At present, however, the door was open, and the egress of the jack, the blows on the bell, and the mannikin’s retreat into the nook again, were visible to many, and audible throughout the church.

The jack had struck half-past eleven.

“ Where’s the woman ? ” whispered some of the spectators.

The young sergeant stood still with the abnormal

rigidity of the old pillars around. He faced the south-east, and was as silent as he was still.

The silence grew to be a noticeable thing as the minutes went on, and nobody else appeared, and not a soul moved. The rattle of the quarter-jack again from its niche, its blow for three-quarters, its fussy retreat, were almost painfully abrupt, and caused many of the congregation to start palpably.

"I wonder where the woman is!" a voice whispered again.

There began now that slight shifting of feet, that artificial coughing among several, which betrays a nervous suspense. At length there was a titter. But the soldier never moved. There he stood, his face to the south-east, upright as a column, his cap in his hand.

The clock ticked on. The women threw off their nervousness, and titters and giggling became more frequent. Then came a dead silence. Every one was waiting for the end. Some persons may have noticed how extraordinarily the striking of quarters seems to quicken the flight of time. It was hardly credible that the jack had not got wrong with the minutes when the rattle began again, the puppet emerged, and the four quarters were struck fitfully as before. One could almost be positive that there was a malicious

leer upon the hideous creature's face, and a mischievous delight in its twitchings. Then followed the dull and remote resonance of the twelve heavy strokes in the tower above. The women were impressed, and there was no giggle this time.

The clergyman glided into the vestry, and the clerk vanished. The sergeant had not yet turned; every woman in the church was waiting to see his face, and he appeared to know it. At last he did turn, and stalked resolutely down the nave, braving them all, with a compressed lip. Two bowed and toothless old almsmen then looked at each other and chuckled, innocently enough; but the sound had a strange weird effect in that place.

Opposite to the church was a paved square, around which several overhanging wood buildings of old time cast a picturesque shade. The young man on leaving the door went to cross the square, when, in the middle, he met a little woman. The expression of her face, which had been one of intense anxiety, sank at the sight of his nearly to terror.

"Well?" he said, in a suppressed passion, without looking at her.

"Oh, Frank—I made a mistake! I thought that church with the spire was All Saints', and I was at the door at half-past eleven to a

minute, as you said. I waited till a quarter to twelve, and found then that I was in All Souls'. But I wasn't much frightened, for I thought it could be to-morrow as well."

" You fool, for so fooling me ! But say no more."

" Shall it be to-morrow, Frank ? " she asked blankly.

" To-morrow ! " and he gave vent to a hoarse laugh. " I don't go through that experience again for some time, I warrant you ! "

" But after all," she expostulated in a trembling voice, " the mistake was not such a terrible thing ! Now, dear Frank, when shall it be ? "

" Ah, when ? God knows ! " he said, with a light irony, and turning from her walked rapidly away.

CHAPTER XVII.

IN THE MARKET-PLACE.

ON Saturday Boldwood was in the market-house as usual, when the disturber of his dreams entered, and became visible to him. Adam had awokened from his deep sleep, and behold! there was Eve. The farmer took courage, and for the first time really looked at her.

Emotional causes and effects are not to be arranged in regular equation. The result from capital employed in the production of any movement of a mental nature is sometimes as tremendous as the cause itself is absurdly minute. When women are in a freakish mood, their usual intuition, either from carelessness or inherent defect, seemingly fails to teach them this, and hence it was that Bathsheba was fated to be astonished to-day.

Boldwood looked at her—not slily, critically, or understandingly, but blankly at gaze, in the way a reaper looks up at a passing train

—as something foreign to his element, and but dimly understood. To Boldwood women had been remote phenomena rather than necessary complements—comets of such uncertain aspect, movement, and permanence, that whether their orbits were as geometrical, unchangeable, and as subject to laws as his own, or as absolutely erratic as they superficially appeared, he had not deemed it his duty to consider.

He saw her black hair, her correct facial curves and profile, and the roundness of her chin and throat. He saw then the side of her eyelids, eyes, and lashes, and the shape of her ear. Next he noticed her figure, her skirt, and the very soles of her shoes.

Boldwood thought her beautiful, but wondered whether he was right in his thought, for it seemed impossible that this romance in the flesh, if so sweet as he imagined, could have been going on long without creating a commotion of delight among men, and provoking more inquiry than Bathsheba had done, even though that was not a little. To the best of his judgment neither nature nor art could improve this perfect one of an imperfect many. His heart began to move within him. Boldwood, it must be remembered, though forty years of age, had never before inspected a woman with

the very centre and force of his glance; they had struck upon all his senses at wide angles.

Was she really beautiful? He could not assure himself that his opinion was true even now. He furtively said to a neighbour, "Is Miss Everdene considered handsome?"

"Oh, yes; she was a good deal noticed the first time she came, if you remember. A very handsome girl indeed."

A man is never more credulous than in receiving favourable opinions on the beauty of a woman he is half, or quite, in love with; a mere child's word on the point has the weight of an R.A.'s. Boldwood was satisfied now.

And this charming woman had in effect said to him "Marry me." Why should she have done that strange thing? Boldwood's blindness to the difference between approving of what circumstances suggest, and originating what they do not suggest, was well matched by Bathsheba's insensibility to the possibly great issues of little beginnings.

She was at this moment coolly dealing with a dashing young farmer, adding up accounts with him as indifferently as if his face had been the pages of a ledger. It was evident that such a nature as his had no attraction for a woman of Bathsheba's taste. But Boldwood

grew hot down to his hands with an incipient jealousy; he trod for the first time the threshold of "the injured lover's hell." His first impulse was to go and thrust himself between them. This could be done, but only in one way—by asking to see a sample of her corn. Boldwood renounced the idea. He could not make the request; it was debasing loveliness to ask it to buy and sell, and jarred with his conceptions of her.

All this time Bathsheba was conscious of having broken into that dignified stronghold at last. His eyes, she knew, were following her everywhere. This was a triumph; and had it come naturally, such a triumph would have been the sweeter to her for this piquing delay. But it had been brought about by misdirected ingenuity, and she valued it only as she valued an artificial flower or a wax fruit.

Being a woman with some good sense in reasoning on subjects wherein her heart was not involved, Bathsheba genuinely repented that a freak which had owed its existence as much to Liddy as to herself, should ever have been undertaken, to disturb the placidity of a man she respected too highly to deliberately tease.

She that day nearly formed the intention of begging his pardon on the very next occasion

of their meeting. The worst features of this arrangement were that, if he thought she ridiculed him, an apology would increase the offence by being disbelieved ; and if he thought she wanted him, it would read like additional evidence of her forwardness.

CHAPTER XVIII.

BOLDWOOD IN MEDITATION—A VISIT.

BOLDWOOD was tenant of what was called the Lower Farm, and his person was the nearest approach to aristocracy that this remoter quarter of Weatherbury could boast of. Genteel strangers, whose god was their town, who might happen to be compelled to linger about this nook for a day, heard the sound of light wheels, and prayed to see good society, to the degree of a solitary lord, or squire at the very least, but it was only Mr. Boldwood going out for the day. They heard the sound of wheels yet once more, and were re-animated to expectancy: it was only Mr. Boldwood coming home again.

His house stood recessed from the road, and the stables, which are to a farm what a fireplace is to a house, were behind, their lower portions being lost amid bushes of laurel. Inside the blue door, open half-way down, were to be seen at this time the backs and tails of half-a-dozen warm and contented horses standing in their

stalls; and thus viewed, presenting alternations of roan and bay, in shapes like a Moorish arch, the tail being a streak down the midst of each. Over these, and lost to the eye gazing in from the outer light, the mouths of the same animals could be heard busily sustaining the above-named warmth and plumpness by quantities of oats and hay. The restless and shadowy figure of a colt wandered up and down a loose-box at the end, whilst the steady grind of all the eaters was occasionally diversified by the rattle of a ope or the stamp of a foot.

Pacing up and down at the heels of the animals was Farmer Boldwood himself. This place was his almonry and cloister in one: here, after looking to the feeding of his four-footed dependents, the celibate would walk and meditate of an evening till the moon's rays streamed in through the cobwebbed windows, or total darkness enveloped the scene.

His square-framed perpendicularity showed more fully now than in the crowd and bustle of the market-house. In this meditative walk his foot met the floor with heel and toe simultaneously, and his fine, reddish-fleshed face was bent downward just enough to render obscure the still mouth and the well-rounded though rather prominent and broad chin. A few clear and thread-like horizontal

lines were the only interruption to the otherwise smooth surface of his large forehead.

The phases of Boldwood's life were ordinary enough, but his was not an ordinary nature. Spiritually and mentally, no less than socially, a commonplace general condition is no conclusive proof that a man has not potentialities above that level.

In all cases this state may be either the mediocrity of inadequacy, as was Oak's, or what we will venture to call the mediocrity of counterpoise, as was Boldwood's. The quiet mean to which we originally found him adhering, and in which, with few exceptions, he had continually moved, was that of neutralization: it was not structural at all. That stillness, which struck casual observers more than anything else in his character and habit, and seemed so precisely like the rest of inanition, may have been the perfect balance of enormous antagonistic forces—positives and negatives in fine adjustment. His equilibrium disturbed, he was in extremity at once.

Boldwood was thus either hot or cold. If an emotion possessed him at all, it ruled him; a feeling not mastering him was entirely latent. Stagnant or rapid, it was never slow. He was always hit mortally, or he was missed. The shallows in the characters of ordinary men were

sterile strands in his, but his depths were so profound as to be practically bottomless.

He had no light and careless touches in his constitution, either for good or for evil. Stern in the outlines of action, mild in the details, he was serious throughout all. He saw no absurd side to the follies of life, and thus, though not quite companionable in the eyes of merry men and scoffers, and those to whom all things show life as a jest, he was not intolerable to the earnest and those acquainted with grief. Being a man who read all the dramas of life seriously, if he failed to please when they were comedies, there was no frivolous treatment to reproach him for when they chanced to end tragically.

Bathsheba was far from dreaming that the dark and silent shape upon which she had so carelessly thrown a seed was a hotbed of tropic intensity. Had she known Boldwood's moods, her blame would have been fearful, and the stain upon her heart ineradicable. Moreover, had she known her present power for good or evil over this man, she would have trembled at her responsibility. Luckily for her present, unluckily for her future tranquillity, her understanding had not yet told her what Boldwood was. Nobody knew entirely; for though it was possible to form guesses concerning his spirited capabilities from old flood-

marks faintly visible, he had never been seen at the high tides which caused them.

Farmer Boldwood came to the stable-door, and looked forth across the level fields. Beyond the first enclosure was a hedge, and on the other side of this a meadow, belonging to Bathsheba's farm.

It was now early spring—the time of going to grass with the sheep, when they have the first feed of the meadows, before these are laid up for mowing. The wind, which had been blowing east for several weeks, had veered to the southward, and the middle of spring had come abruptly—almost without a beginning. It was that period in the vernal quarter when we may suppose the Dryads to be waking for the season. The vegetable world begins to move and swell and the saps to rise, till in the completest silence of lone gardens and trackless plantations, where everything seems helpless and still after the bond and slavery of frost, there are bustlings, strainings, united thrusts, and pulls-all-together, in comparison with which the powerful tugs of cranes and pulleys in a noisy city are but pigmy efforts.

Boldwood, looking into the distant meadows, saw there three figures. They were those of Miss Everdene, Shepherd Oak, and Cainy Ball.

When Bathsheba's figure shone upon the farmer's eyes, it lighted him up as the moon

lights up a great tower. A man's body is as the shell, or the tablet, of his soul, as he is reserved or ingenuous, overflowing or self-contained. There was a change in Boldwood's exterior from its former impassibleness ; and his face showed that he was now living outside his defences for the first time, and with a fearful sense of exposure. It is the usual experience of strong natures when they love.

At last he arrived at a conclusion. It was to go across and inquire boldly of her.

The insulation of his heart by his reserve during these many years, without a duct of any kind for disposable emotion, had worked its effect. It has been observed more than once that the causes of love are chiefly subjective, and Boldwood was a living testimony to the truth of the proposition. No mother existed to absorb his devotion, no sister for his tenderness, no idle ties for sense. He became surcharged with the compound, which was genuine lover's love.

He approached the gate of the meadow. Beyond it the ground was melodious with ripples, and the sky with larks ; the low bleating of the flock mingling with both. Mistress and man were engaged in the operation of making a lamb "take," which is performed whenever a ewe has lost her own offspring, one of the twins of

another ewe being given her as a substitute. Gabriel had skinned the dead lamb, and was tying the skin over the body of the live lamb, in the customary manner, whilst Bathsheba was holding open a little pen of four hurdles, into which the mother and foisted lamb were driven, where they would remain till the old sheep conceived an affection for the young one.

Bathsheba looked up at the completion of the manœuvre, and saw the farmer by the gate, where he was overhung by a willow tree in full bloom. Gabriel, to whom her face was as the uncertain glory of an April day, ever regardful of its faintest changes, instantly discerned thereon the mark of some influence from without, in the form of a keenly self-conscious reddening. He also turned and beheld Boldwood.

At once connecting these signs with the letter Boldwood had shown him, Gabriel suspected her of some coquettish procedure begun by that means, and carried on since he knew not how.

Farmer Boldwood had read the pantomime denoting that they were conscious of his presence, and the perception was as too much light turned upon his new sensibility. He was still in the road, and by moving on he hoped that neither would recognize that he had originally intended to enter the field. He passed by with an utter and

overwhelming sensation of ignorance, shyness, and doubt. Perhaps in her manner there were signs that she wished to see him—perhaps not—he could not read a woman. The cabala of this erotic philosophy seemed to consist of the subtlest meanings expressed in misleading ways. Every turn, look, word, and accent contained a mystery quite distinct from its obvious import, and not one had ever been pondered by him until now.

As for Bathsheba, she was not deceived into the belief that Farmer Boldwood had walked by on business or in idleness. She collected the probabilities of the case, and concluded that she was herself responsible for Boldwood's appearance there. It troubled her much to see what a great flame a little wildfire was likely to kindle. Bathsheba was no schemer for marriage, nor was she deliberately a trifler with the affections of men, and a censor's experience on seeing an actual flirt after observing her would have been a feeling of surprise that Bathsheba could be so different from such a one, and yet so like what a flirt is supposed to be.

She resolved never again, by look or by sign, to interrupt the steady flow of this man's life. But a resolution to avoid an evil is seldom framed till the evil is so far advanced as to make avoidance impossible.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE SHEEP-WASHING—THE OFFER.

BOLDWOOD did eventually call upon her. She was not at home. "Of course not," he murmured. In contemplating Bathsheba as a woman, he had forgotten the accidents of her position as an agriculturist—that being as much of a farmer, and as extensive a farmer, as himself, her probable whereabouts was out-of-doors at this time of the year. This, and the other oversights Boldwood was guilty of, were natural to the mood, and still more natural to the circumstances. The great aids to idealization in love were present here: occasional observation of her from a distance, and the absence of social intercourse with her—visual familiarity, oral strangeness. The smaller human elements were kept out of sight; the pettinesses that enter so largely into all earthly living and doing were disguised by the accident of lover and loved-one not being on visiting terms, and there was hardly awakened a thought in Bold-

wood that sorry household realities appertained to her, or that she, like all others, had moments of commonplace, when to be least plainly seen was to be most prettily remembered. Thus a mild sort of apotheosis took place in his fancy, whilst she still lived and breathed within his own horizon, a troubled creature like himself.

It was the end of May when the farmer determined to be no longer repulsed by trivialities or distracted by suspense. He had by this time grown used to being in love; the passion now startled him less even when it tortured him more, and he felt himself adequate to the situation. On inquiring for her at her house they had told him she was at the sheep-washing, and he went off to seek her there.

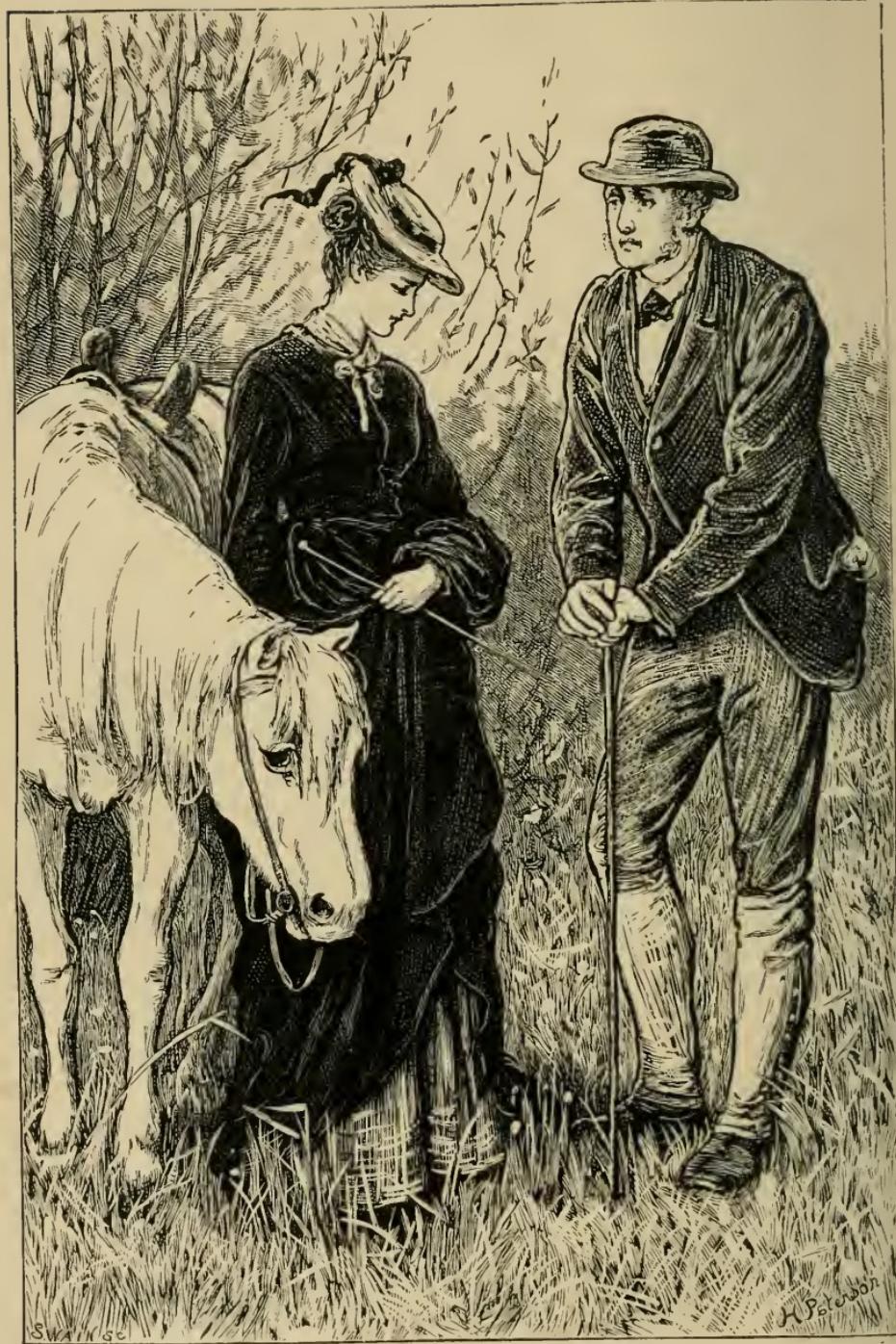
The sheep-washing pool was a perfectly circular basin of stonework in the meadows, full of the clearest water. To birds on the wing its glassy surface, reflecting the light sky, must have been visible for miles round as a glistening Cyclop's eye in a green face. The grass about the margin at this season was a sight to remember long—in a minor sort of way. Its activity in sucking the moisture from the rich damp sod was almost a process observable by the eye. The outskirts of this level water-meadow were diversified by rounded and hollow pastures, where just now

everything that was not a buttercup was a daisy, losing this character somewhat as they sank to the verge of the intervening river. It slid along noiselessly as a shade, the swelling reeds and sedge forming a flexible palisade along its moist brink. To the north of the mead were trees, the leaves of which were new, soft, moist, and flexible, not yet having stiffened and darkened under summer sun and drought, their colour being yellow beside a green, green beside a yellow. From the recesses of this knot of foliage the loud notes of three cuckoos were resounding through the still air.

Boldwood went meditating down the slopes with his eyes on his boots, which the yellow pollen from the buttercups had bronzed in artistic gradations. A tributary of the main stream flowed through the basin of the pool by means of an inlet and outlet at opposite points of its diameter. Shepherd Oak, Jan Coggan, Moon, Poorgrass, Cain Ball, and several others were assembled here, all dripping wet to the very roots of their hair, and Bathsheba was standing by in a new riding-habit—the most elegant she had ever worn—the reins of her horse being looped over her arm. Flagons of cider were rolling about upon the green. The meek sheep were pushed into the pool by Coggan and Matthew Moon, who stood by the lower hatch,

immersed to their waists ; then Gabriel, who stood on the brink, thrust them under as they swam along, with an instrument like a crutch, formed for the purpose, and also for assisting the exhausted animals when the wool became saturated and they began to sink. They were then let out against the stream, and through the upper opening, all impurities thus flowing away below—Cainy Ball and Joseph, who performed this latter operation, being if possible wetter than the rest ; they resembled dolphins under a fountain, every protuberance and angle of their clothes dribbling forth a small rill.

Boldwood came close and bid her good-morning, with such constraint that she could not but think he had stepped across to the washing for its own sake, hoping not to find her there ; more, she fancied his brow severe and his eye slighting. Bathsheba immediately contrived to withdraw, and glided along by the river till she was a stone's throw off : she heard footsteps brushing the grass, and had a consciousness that love was encircling her like a perfume. Instead of turning or waiting, Bathsheba went further among the high sedges, but Boldwood seemed determined, and pressed on till they were completely past the bend of the river. Here, without being seen, they could hear the splashing and shouts of the washers above.



"I FEEL ALMOST- TOO MUCH TO THINK," HE SAID.

"Miss Everdene!" said the farmer.

She trembled, turned, and said "Good-morning." His tone was so utterly removed from all she had expected as a beginning. It was lowness and quiet accented: an emphasis of deep meanings, their form, at the same time, being scarcely expressed. Silence has sometimes a remarkable power of showing itself as the disembodied soul of feeling wandering without its carcase, and it is then more impressive than speech. In the same way, to say a little is often to tell more than to say a great deal. Boldwood told everything in that word.

As the consciousness expands on learning that what was fancied to be the rumble of wheels is the reverberation of thunder, so did Bathsheba's at her intuitive conviction.

"I feel—almost too much—to think," he said, with a solemn simplicity. "I have come to speak to you without preface. My life is not my own since I have beheld you clearly, Miss Everdene—I come to make you an offer of marriage."

Bathsheba tried to preserve an absolutely neutral countenance, and all the motion she made was that of closing lips which had previously been a little parted.

"I am now forty-one years old," he went on. "I may have been called a confirmed bachelor,

and I was a confirmed bachelor. I had never any views of myself as a husband in my earlier days, nor have I made any calculation on the subject since I have been older. But we all change, and my change, in this matter, came with seeing you. I have felt lately, more and more, that my present way of living is bad in every respect. Beyond all things, I want you as my wife."

"I feel, Mr. Boldwood, that though I respect you much, I do not feel—what would justify me to—in accepting your offer," she stammered.

This giving back of dignity for dignity seemed to open the sluices of feeling that Boldwood had as yet kept closed.

"My life is a burden without you," he exclaimed, in a low voice. "I want you—I want you to let me say I love you again and again!"

Bathsheba answered nothing, and the horse upon her arm seemed so impressed, that instead of cropping the herbage it looked up.

"I think and hope you care enough for me to listen to what I have to tell!"

Bathsheba's momentary impulse at hearing this was to ask why he thought that, till she remembered that, far from being a conceited assumption on Boldwood's part, it was but the natural con-

clusion of serious reflection based on deceptive premises of her own offering.

"I wish I could say courteous flatteries to you," the farmer continued in an easier tone, "and put my rugged feeling into a graceful shape: but I have neither power nor patience to learn such things. I want you for my wife—so wildly that no other feeling can abide in me; but I should not have spoken out had I not been led to hope."

"The valentine again! Oh that valentine!" she said to herself, but not a word to him.

"If you can love me, say so, Miss Everdene. If not—don't say no."

"Mr. Boldwood, it is painful to have to say I am surprised, so that I don't know how to answer you with propriety and respect—but am only just able to speak out my feeling—I mean my meaning; that I am afraid I can't marry you, much as I respect you. You are too dignified for me to suit you, sir."

"But, Miss Everdene!"

"I—I didn't—I know I ought never to have dreamt of sending that valentine—forgive me, sir—it was a wanton thing which no woman with any self-respect should have done. If you will only pardon my thoughtlessness, I promise never to——"

"No, no, no. Don't say thoughtlessness! Make

me think it was something more—that it was a sort of prophetic instinct—the beginning of a feeling that you would like me. You torture me to say it was done in thoughtlessness—I never thought of it in that light, and I can't endure it. Ah! I wish I knew how to win you! but that I can't do—I can only ask if I have already got you. If I have not, and it is not true that you have come unwittingly to me as I have to you, I can say no more."

"I have not fallen in love with you, Mr. Boldwood—certainly I may say that." She allowed a very small smile to creep for the first time over her serious face in saying this, and the white row of upper teeth, and keenly cut lips already noticed, suggested an idea of heartlessness, which was immediately contradicted by the pleasant eyes.

"But you will just think—in kindness and condescension think—if you cannot bear with me as a husband! I fear I am too old for you, but believe me I will take more care of you than would many a man of your own age. I will protect and cherish you with all my strength—I will indeed. You shall have no cares—be worried by no household affairs, and live quite at ease, Miss Everdene. The dairy superintendence shall be done by a man—I can afford it well—you shall never have so much as to look out of

doors at hay-making time, or to think of weather in the harvest. I rather cling to the chaise, because it is the same my poor father and mother drove, but if you don't like it I will sell it, and you shall have a pony-carriage of your own. I cannot say how far above every other idea and object on earth you seem to me—nobody knows—God only knows—how much you are to me!"

Bathsheba's heart was young, and it swelled with sympathy for the deep-natured man who spoke so simply.

"Don't say it: don't! I cannot bear you to feel so much, and me to feel nothing. And I am afraid they will notice us, Mr. Boldwood. Will you let the matter rest now? I cannot think collectedly. I did not know you were going to say this to me. Oh, I am wicked to have made you suffer so!" She was frightened as well as agitated at his vehemence.

"Say then, that you don't absolutely refuse. Do not quite refuse!"

"I can do nothing. I cannot answer."

"I may speak to you again on the subject?"

"Yes."

"I may think of you?"

"Yes, I suppose you may think of me."

"And hope to obtain you?"

"No—do not hope! Let us go on."

"I will call upon you again to-morrow."

"No—please not. Give me time."

"Yes—I will give you any time," he said earnestly and gratefully. "I am happier now."

"No—I beg you! Don't be happier if happiness only comes from my agreeing. Be neutral, Mr. Boldwood! I must think."

"I will wait," he said.

And then she turned away. Boldwood dropped his eyes to the ground, and stood long like a man who did not know where he was. Realities then returned upon him like the pain of a wound received in an excitement which eclipses it, and he, too, then went on.

CHAPTER XX.

PERPLEXITY—GRINDING THE SHEARS—A QUARREL.

“ He is so disinterested and kind to offer me all that I can desire,” Bathsheba said, musingly.

Yet Farmer Boldwood, whether by nature kind or the reverse to kind, did not exercise kindness here. The rarest offerings of the purest loves are but a self-indulgence, and no generosity at all.

Bathsheba, not being the least in love with him, was eventually able to look calmly at his offer. It was one which many women of her own station in the neighbourhood, and not a few of higher rank, would have been wild to accept and proud to publish. In every point of view, ranging from politic to passionate, it was desirable that she, a lonely girl, should marry, and marry this earnest, well-to-do, and respected man. He was close to her doors: his standing was sufficient: his qualities were even supererogatory. Had she felt, which she did not, any wish whatever for the married state in the abstract, she could not

reasonably have rejected him as a woman who frequently appealed to her understanding for deliverance from her whims. Boldwood as a means to marriage was unexceptionable: she esteemed and liked him: yet she did not want him. It appears that men take wives because possession is not possible without marriage, and that women accept husbands because marriage is not possible without possession; with totally differing aims the method is the same on both sides. But the understood incentive on the woman's part was wanting here. Besides, Bathsheba's position as absolute mistress of a farm and house was a novel one, and the novelty had not yet begun to wear off.

But a disquiet filled her which was somewhat to her credit, for it would have affected few. Beyond the mentioned reasons with which she combated her objections, she had a strong feeling that having been the one who began the game, she ought in honesty to accept the consequences. Still the reluctance remained. She said in the same breath that it would be ungenerous not to marry Boldwood, and that she couldn't do it to save her life.

Bathsheba's was an impulsive nature under a deliberative aspect. An Elizabeth in brain and a Mary Stuart in spirit, she often performed

actions of the greatest temerity with a manner of extreme discretion. Many of her thoughts were perfect syllogisms; unluckily they always remained thoughts. Only a few were irrational assumptions; but, unfortunately, they were the ones which most frequently grew into deeds.

The next day to that of the declaration, she found Gabriel Oak at the bottom of her garden, grinding his shears for the sheep-shearing. All the surrounding cottages were more or less scenes of the same operation; the scurr of whetting spread into the sky from all parts of the village as from an armoury previous to a campaign. Peace and war kiss each other at their hours of preparation, sickles, scythes, shears, and pruning-hooks mingling with swords, bayonets, and lances, in their common necessity for point and edge.

Cainy Ball turned the handle of Gabriel's grind-stone, his head performing a melancholy see-saw up and down with each turn of the wheel. Oak stood somewhat as Eros is represented when in the act of sharpening his arrows: his figure slightly bent, the weight of his body thrown over on the shears, and his head balanced sideways, with a critical compression of the lips and contraction of the eyelids to crown the attitude.

His mistress came up and looked upon them in silence for a minute or two; then she said,—

"Cain, go to the lower mead and catch the bay mare. I'll turn the winch of the grindstone. I want to speak to you, Gabriel."

Cain departed, and Bathsheba took the handle. Gabriel had glanced up in intense surprise, quelled its expression, and looked down again. Bathsheba turned the winch, and Gabriel applied the shears.

The peculiar motion involved in turning a wheel has a wonderful tendency to benumb the mind. It is a sort of attenuated variety of Ixion's punishment, and contributes a dismal chapter to the history of gaols. The brain gets muddled, the head grows heavy, and the body's centre of gravity seems to settle by degrees in a leaden lump somewhere between the eyebrows and the crown. Bathsheba felt the unpleasant symptoms after two or three dozen turns.

"Will you turn, Gabriel, and let me hold the shears?" she said. "My head is in a whirl, and I can't talk."

Gabriel turned. Bathsheba then began, with some awkwardness, allowing her thoughts to stray occasionally from her story to attend to the shears, which required a little nicety in sharpening.

"I wanted to ask you if the men made any observations on my going behind the sedge with Mr. Boldwood yesterday?"

"Yes, they did," said Gabriel. "You don't hold

the shears right, miss—I knew you wouldn't know, the way—hold like this."

He relinquished the winch, and inclosing her two hands completely in his own (taking each as we sometimes clasp a child's hand in teaching him to write), grasped the shears with her. "Incline the edge so," he said.

Hands and shears were inclined to suit the words, and held thus for a peculiarly long time by the instructor as he spoke.

"That will do," exclaimed Bathsheba. "Loose my hands. I won't have them held! Turn the winch."

Gabriel freed her hands quietly, retired to his handle, and the grinding went on.

"Did the men think it odd?" she said again.

"Odd was not the idea, miss."

"What did they say?"

"That Farmer Boldwood's name and your own were likely to be flung over pulpit together before the year was out."

"I thought so by the look of them! Why, there's nothing in it. A more foolish remark was never made, and I want you to contradict it: that's what I came for."

Gabriel looked incredulous and sad, but between his movements of incredulity, relieved.

"They must have heard our conversation," she continued.

"Well, then, Bathsheba!" said Oak, stopping the handle, and gazing into her face with astonishment.

"Miss Everdene, you mean," she said, with dignity.

"I mean this, that if Mr. Boldwood really spoke of marriage, I am not going to tell a story and say he didn't to please you. I have already tried to please you too much for my own good."

Bathsheba regarded him with round-eyed perplexity. She did not know whether to pity him for disappointed love of her, or to be angry with him for having got over it—his tone being ambiguous.

"I said I wanted you just to mention that it was not true I was going to be married to him," she murmured, with a slight decline in her assurance.

"I can say that to them if you wish, Miss Everdene. And I could likewise give an opinion to you on what you have done."

"I daresay. But I don't want your opinion."

"I suppose not," said Gabriel bitterly, and going on with his turning, his words rising and falling in a regular swell and cadence as he stooped or rose with the winch, which directed them, according to his position, perpendicularly into the earth, or horizontally along the garden, his eyes being fixed on a leaf upon the ground.

With Bathsheba a hastened act was a rash act; but, as does not always happen, time gained was prudence insured. It must be added, however, that time was very seldom gained. At this period the single opinion in the parish on herself and her doings that she valued as sounder than her own was Gabriel Oak's. And the outspoken honesty of his character was such that on any subject, even that of her love for, or marriage with, another man, the same disinterestedness of opinion might be calculated on, and be had for the asking. Thoroughly convinced of the impossibility of his own suit, a high resolve constrained him not to injure that of another. This is a lover's most stoical virtue, as the lack of it is a lover's most venial sin. Knowing he would reply truly, she asked the question, painful as she must have known the subject would be. Such is the selfishness of some charming women. Perhaps it was some excuse for her thus torturing honesty to her own advantage, that she had absolutely no other sound judgment within easy reach.

"Well, what is your opinion of my conduct?" she said, quietly.

"That it is unworthy of any thoughtful, and meek, and comely woman."

In an instant Bathsheba's face coloured with the angry crimson of a Danby sunset. But she forbore to utter this feeling, and the reticence of

her tongue only made the loquacity of her face the more noticeable.

The next thing Gabriel did was to make a mistake.

"Perhaps you don't like the rudeness of my reprimanding you, for I know it is rudeness; but I thought it would do good."

She instantly replied sarcastically,—

"On the contrary, my opinion of you is so low, that I see in your abuse the praise of discerning people."

"I am glad you don't mind it, for I said it honestly, and with every serious meaning."

"I see. But, unfortunately, when you try not to speak in jest you are amusing—just as when you wish to avoid seriousness you sometimes say a sensible word."

It was a hard hit, but Bathsheba had unmistakably lost her temper, and on that account Gabriel had never in his life kept his own better. He said nothing. She then broke out,—

"I may ask, I suppose, where in particular my unworthiness lies? In my not marrying you, perhaps!"

"Not by any means," said Gabriel quietly. "I have long given up thinking of that matter."

"Or wishing it, I suppose," she said; and it was apparent that she expected an unhesitating denial of this supposition.

Whatever Gabriel felt, he coolly echoed her words,—

“Or wishing it either.”

A woman may be treated with a bitterness which is sweet to her, and with a rudeness which is not offensive. Bathsheba would have submitted to an indignant chastisement for her levity had Gabriel protested that he was loving her at the same time; the impetuosity of passion unrequited is bearable, even if it stings and anathematizes—there is a triumph in the humiliation, and a tenderness in the strife. This was what she had been expecting, and what she had not got. To be lectured because the lecturer saw her in the cold morning light of open-shuttered disillusion was exasperating. He had not finished, either. He continued in a more agitated voice :—

“ My opinion is (since you ask it) that you are greatly to blame for playing pranks upon a man like Mr. Boldwood, merely as a pastime. Leading on a man you don’t care for is not a praiseworthy action. And even, Miss Everdene, if you seriously inclined towards him, you might have let him discover it in some way of true loving-kindness, and not by sending him a valentine’s letter.”

Bathsheba laid down the shears.

“ I cannot allow any man to—to criticise my

private conduct!" she exclaimed. "Nor will I for a minute. So you'll please leave the farm at the end of the week!"

It may have been a peculiarity—at any rate it was a fact—that when Bathsheba was swayed by an emotion of an earthly sort her lower lip trembled: when by a refined emotion, her upper or heavenward one. Her nether lip quivered now.

"Very well, so I will," said Gabriel, calmly. He had been held to her by a beautiful thread which it pained him to spoil by breaking, rather than by a chain he could not break. "I should be even better pleased to go at once," he added.

"Go at once then, in Heaven's name!" said she, her eyes flashing at his, though never meeting them. "Don't let me see your face any more."

"Very well, Miss Everdene—so it shall be."

And he took his shears and went away from her in placid dignity, as Moses left the presence of Pharaoh.

CHAPTER XXI.

TROUBLES IN THE FOLD—A MESSAGE.

GABRIEL OAK had ceased to feed the Weatherbury flock for about four-and-twenty hours, when on Sunday afternoon the elderly gentlemen, Joseph Poorgrass, Matthew Moon, Fray, and half-a-dozen others came running up to the house of the mistress of the Upper Farm.

“Whatever *is* the matter, men?” she said meeting them at the door just as she was on the point of coming out on her way to church, and ceasing in a moment from the close compression of her two red lips, with which she had accompanied the exertion of pulling on a tight glove.

“Sixty!” said Joseph Poorgrass.

“Seventy!” said Moon.

“Fifty-nine!” said Susan Tall’s husband.

“—Sheep have broke fence,” said Fray.

“—And got into a field of young clover,” said Tall.

“—Young clover!” said Moon.

“—Clover ! ” said Joseph Poorgrass.

“And they be getting blasted,” said Henery Fray.

“That they be,” said Joseph.

“And will all die as dead as nits, if they bain’t got out and cured ! ” said Tall.

Joseph’s countenance was drawn into lines and puckers by his concern. Fray’s forehead was wrinkled both perpendicularly and crosswise, after the pattern of a portcullis, expressive of a double despair. Laban Tall’s lips were thin, and his face was rigid. Matthew’s jaws sank, and his eyes turned whichever way the strongest muscle happened to pull them.

“Yes,” said Joseph, “and I was sitting at home, looking for Ephesians, and says I to myself, ‘Tis nothing but Corinthians and Thessalonians in this danged Testament,’ when who should come in but Henery there : ‘Joseph,’ he said, ‘the sheep have blasted themselves——’ ”

With Bathsheba it was a moment when thought was speech and speech exclamation. Moreover, she had hardly recovered her equanimity since the disturbance which she had suffered from Oak’s remarks.

“That’s enough—that’s enough!—oh, you fools ! ” she cried, throwing the parasol and prayer-book into the passage, and running out of doors in

the direction signified. “To come to me, and not go and get them out directly! Oh, the stupid numskulls!”

Her eyes were at their darkest and brightest now. Bathsheba’s beauty belonging rather to the redeemed-demonian than to the blemished-angelic school, she never looked so well as when she was angry—and particularly when the effect was heightened by a rather dashing velvet dress, carefully put on before a glass.

All the ancient men ran in a jumbled throng after her to the clover-field, Joseph sinking down in the midst when about half way, like an individual withering in a world which got more and more unstable. Having once received the stimulus that her presence always gave them, they went round among the sheep with a will. The majority of the afflicted animals were lying down, and could not be stirred. These were bodily lifted out, and the others driven into the adjoining field. Here, after the lapse of a few minutes, several more fell down, and lay helpless and livid as the rest.

Bathsheba, with a sad, bursting heart, looked at these primest specimens of her prime flock as they rolled there,—

Swoln with wind and the rank mist they drew.

Many of them foamed at the mouth, their breath-

ing being quick and short, whilst the bodies of all were fearfully distended.

"Oh, what can I do, what can I do!" said Bathsheba, helplessly. "Sheep are such unfortunate animals!—there's always something happening to them! I never knew a flock pass a year without getting into some scrape or other."

"There's only one way of saving them," said Tall.

"What way? Tell me quick!"

"They must be pierced in the side with a thing made on purpose."

"Can you do it? Can I?"

"No, ma'am. We can't, nor you neither. It must be done in a particular spot. If ye go to the right or left but an inch you stab the ewe and kill her. Not even a shepherd can do it, as a rule."

"Then they must die," she said, in a resigned tone.

"Only one man in the neighbourhood knows the way," said Joseph, now just come up. "He could cure 'em all if he were here."

"Who is he? Let's get him!"

"Shepherd Oak," said Matthew. "Ah, he's a clever man in talents!"

"Ah, that he is so!" said Joseph Poorgrass.

"True—he's the man," said Laban Tall.

"How dare you name that man in my presence!"

she said excitedly. "I told you never to allude to him, nor shall you if you stay with me. Ah!" she added, brightening, "Farmer Boldwood knows!"

"Oh no, ma'am," said Matthew. "Two of his store ewes got into some vetches t'other day, and were just like these. He sent a man on horseback here posthaste for Gable, and Gable went and saved 'em. Farmer Boldwood hev got the thing they do it with. 'Tis a holler pipe, with a sharp pricker inside. Isn't it, Joseph?"

"Ay—a holler pipe," echoed Joseph. "That's what 'tis."

"Ay, sure—that's the machine," chimed in Henery Fray, reflectively, with an Oriental indifference to the flight of time.

"Well," burst out Bathsheba, "don't stand there with your 'ayes' and your 'sures,' talking at me! Get somebody to cure the sheep, instantly!"

All then stalked off in consternation, to get somebody as directed, without any idea of who it was to be. In a minute they had vanished through the gate, and she stood alone with the dying flock.

"Never will I send for him—never!" she said, firmly.

One of the ewes here contracted its muscles horribly, extended itself, and jumped high into the air. The leap was an astonishing one. The ewe fell heavily, and lay still.

Bathsheba went up to it. The sheep was dead.

"Oh, what shall I do—what shall I do!" she again exclaimed, wringing her hands. "I won't send for him. No, I won't!"

The most vigorous expression of a resolution does not always coincide with the greatest vigour of the resolution itself. It is often flung out as a sort of prop to support a decaying conviction which, whilst strong, required no enunciation to prove it so. The "No, I won't" of Bathsheba meant virtually, "I think I must."

She followed her assistants through the gate, and lifted her hand to one of them. Laban answered to her signal.

"Where is Oak staying?"

"Across the valley at Nest Cottage."

"Jump on the bay mare, and ride across, and say he must return instantly—that I say so."

Tall scrambled off to the field, and in two minutes was on Poll, the bay, bare-backed, and with only a halter by way of rein. He diminished down the hill.

Bathsheba watched. So did all the rest. Tall cantered along the bridle-path through Sixteen Acres, Sheeplands, Middle Field, The Flats, Cappel's Piece, shrank almost to a point, crossed the bridge, and ascended from the valley through Springmead and Whitepits on the other side. The

cottage to which Gabriel had retired before taking his final departure from the locality was visible as a white spot on the opposite hill, backed by blue firs. Bathsheba walked up and down. The men entered the field and endeavoured to ease the anguish of the dumb creatures by rubbing them. Nothing availed.

Bathsheba continued walking. The horse was seen descending the hill, and the wearisome series had to be repeated in reverse order : Whitepits, Springmead, Cappel's Piece, The Flats, Middle Field, Sheeplands, Sixteen Acres. She hoped Tall had had presence of mind enough to give the mare up to Gabriel, and return himself on foot. The rider neared them. It was Tall.

“ Oh, what folly ! ” said Bathsheba.

Gabriel was not visible anywhere.

“ Perhaps he is already gone,” she said.

Tall came into the inclosure, and leapt off, his face tragic as Morton's after the Battle of Shrewsbury.

“ Well ? ” said Bathsheba, unwilling to believe that her verbal *lettre-de-cachet* could possibly have miscarried.

“ He says *beggars mustn't be choosers*, ” replied Laban.

“ What ! ” said the young farmer, opening her eyes and drawing in her breath for an outburst.

Joseph Poorgrass retired a few steps behind a hurdle.

"He says he shall not come unless you request him to come civilly and in a proper manner, as becomes any person begging a favour."

"Oh, ho, that's his answer! Where does he get his airs? Who am I, then, to be treated like that? Shall I beg to a man who has begged to me?"

Another of the flock sprang into the air, and fell dead.

The men looked grave, as if they suppressed opinion.

Bathsheba turned aside, her eyes full of tears. The strait she was in through pride and shrewishness could not be disguised longer: she burst out crying bitterly; they all saw it; and she attempted no further concealment.

"I wouldn't cry about it, miss," said William Smallbury, compassionately. "Why not ask him softer like? I'm sure he'd come then. Gable is a true man in that way."

Bathsheba checked her grief and wiped her eyes. "Oh, it is a wicked cruelty to me—it is—it is!" she murmured. "And he drives me to do what I wouldn't; yes, he does!—Tall, comeindoors."

After this collapse, not very dignified for the head of an establishment, she went into the house, Tall at her heels. Here she sat down and hastily

scribbled a note between the small convulsive sobs of convalescence which follow a fit of crying as a ground-swell follows a storm. The note was none the less polite for being written in a hurry. She held it at a distance, was about to fold it, then added these words at the bottom :

“Do not desert me, Gabriel!”

She looked a little redder in refolding it, and closed her lips, as if thereby to suspend till too late the action of conscience in examining whether such strategy was justifiable. The note was despatched as the message had been, and Bathsheba waited indoors for the result.

It was an anxious quarter of an hour that intervened between the messenger's departure and the sound of the horse's tramp again outside. She could not watch this time, but, leaning over the old bureau at which she had written the letter, closed her eyes, as if to keep out both hope and fear.

The case, however, was a promising one. Gabriel was not angry, he was simply neutral, although her first command had been so haughty. Such imperiousness would have damned a little less beauty ; and on the other hand, such beauty would have redeemed a little less imperiousness.

She went out when the horse was heard, and

looked up. A mounted figure passed between her and the sky, and went on towards the field of sheep, the rider turning his face in receding. Gabriel looked at her. It was a moment when a woman's eyes and tongue tell distinctly opposite tales. Bathsheba looked full of gratitude, and she said :—

“ Oh, Gabriel, how could you serve me so unkindly !”

Such a tenderly-shaped reproach for his previous delay was the one speech in the language that he could pardon for not being commendation of his readiness now.

Gabriel murmured a confused reply, and hastened on. She knew from the look which sentence in her note had brought him. Bathsheba followed to the field.

Gabriel was already among the turgid prostrate forms. He had flung off his coat, rolled up his shirt-sleeves, and taken from his pocket the instrument of salvation. It was a small tube or trochar, with a lance passing down the inside ; and Gabriel began to use it with a dexterity that would have graced a hospital-surgeon. Passing his hand over the sheep's left flank, and selecting the proper point, he punctured the skin and rumen with the lance as it stood in the tube ; then he suddenly withdrew the lance, retaining the

tube in its place. A current of air rushed up the tube, forcible enough to have extinguished a candle held at the orifice.

It has been said that mere ease after torment is delight for a time ; and the countenances of these poor creatures expressed it now. Forty-nine operations were successfully performed. Owing to the great hurry necessitated by the far-gone state of some of the flock, Gabriel missed his aim in one case, and in one only—striking wide of the mark, and inflicting a mortal blow at once upon the suffering ewe. Four had died ; three recovered without an operation. The total number of sheep which had thus strayed and injured themselves so dangerously was fifty-seven.

When the love-led man had ceased from his labours, Bathsheba came and looked him in the face.

“ Gabriel, will you stay on with me ? ” she said, smiling winningly, and not troubling to bring her lips quite together again at the end, because there was going to be another smile soon.

“ I will,” said Gabriel.

And she smiled on him again.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE GREAT BARN AND THE SHEEP-SHEARERS.

MEN thin away to insignificance and oblivion quite as often by not making the most of good spirits when they have them as by lacking good spirits when they are indispensable. Gabriel lately, for the first time since his prostration by misfortune, had been independent in thought and vigorous in action to a marked extent—conditions which, powerless without an opportunity as an opportunity without them is barren, would have given him a sure and certain lift upwards when the favourable conjunction should have occurred. But this incurable loitering beside Bathsheba Everdene stole his time ruinously. The spring tides were going by without floating him off, and the neap might soon come which could not.

It was the first day of June, and the sheep-shearing season culminated, the landscape, even to the leanest pasture, being all health and colour. Every green was young, every pore was

open, and every stalk was swollen with racing currents of juice. God was palpably present in the country, and the devil had gone with the world to town. Flossy catkins of the later kinds, fern-fronds like bishops' crosiers, the square-headed moschate, the odd cuckoo-pint—like an apoplectic saint in a niche of malachite—clear white ladies'-smocks, the toothwort, approximating to human flesh, the enchanter's nightshade, and the black-petaled doleful-bells were among the quainter objects of the vegetable world in and about Weatherbury at this teeming time; and of the animal, the metamorphosed figures of Mr. Jan Coggan, the master-shearer; the second and third shearers, who travelled in the exercise of their calling, and do not require definition by name; Henery Fray the fourth shearer, Susan Tall's husband the fifth, Joseph Poorgrass the sixth, young Cain Ball as assistant-shearer, and Gabriel Oak as general supervisor. None of these were clothed to any extent worth mentioning, each appearing to have hit in the matter of raiment the decent mean between a high and low caste Hindoo. An angularity of lineament, and a fixity of facial machinery in general, proclaimed that serious work was the order of the day.

They sheared in the great barn, called for the nonce the Shearing-barn, which on ground-

plan resembled a church with transepts. It not only emulated the form of the neighbouring church of the parish, but vied with it in antiquity. Whether the barn had ever formed one of a group of conventional buildings nobody seemed to be aware; no trace of such surroundings remained. The vast porches at the sides, lofty enough to admit a waggon laden to its highest with corn in the sheaf, were spanned by heavy-pointed arches of stone, broadly and boldly cut, whose very simplicity was the origin of a grandeur not apparent in erections where more ornament has been attempted. The dusky, filmed, chestnut roof, braced and tied in by huge collars, curves, and diagonals, was far nobler in design, because more wealthy in material, than nine-tenths of those in our modern churches. Along each side wall was a range of striding buttresses, throwing deep shadows on the spaces between them, which were perforated by lancet openings, combining in their proportions the precise requirements both of beauty and ventilation.

One could say about this barn, what could hardly be said of either the church or the castle, akin to it in age and style, that the purpose which had dictated its original erection was the same with that to which it was still applied. Unlike and superior to either of those two typical

remnants of mediævalism, the old barn embodied practices which had suffered no mutilation at the hands of time. Here at least the spirit of the builders then was at one with the spirit of the beholder now. Standing before this abraded pile the eye regarded its present usage, the mind dwelt upon its past history, with a satisfied sense of functional continuity throughout—a feeling almost of gratitude, and quite of pride, at the permanence of the idea which had heaped it up. The fact that four centuries had neither proved it to be founded on a mistake, inspired any hatred of its purpose, nor given rise to any reaction that had battered it down, invested this simple grey effort of old minds with a repose, if not a grandeur, which a too curious reflection was apt to disturb in its ecclesiastical and military compeers. For once mediævalism and modernism had a common standpoint. The lanceolate windows, the time-eaten arch-stones and chamfers, the orientation of the axis, the misty chestnut work of the rafters, referred to no exploded fortifying art or worn-out religious creed. The defence and salvation of the body by daily bread is still a study, a religion, and a desire.

To-day the large side doors were thrown open towards the sun to admit a bountiful light to the immediate spot of the shearers' operations, which

was the wood threshing-floor in the centre, formed of thick oak, black with age and polished by the beating of flails for many generations, till it had grown as slippery and as rich in hue as the state-room floors of an Elizabethan mansion. Here the shearers knelt, the sun slanting in upon their bleached shirts, tanned arms, and the polished shears they flourished, causing them to bristle with a thousand rays strong enough to blind a weak-eyed man. Beneath them a captive sheep lay panting, increasing the rapidity of its pants as misgiving merged in terror, till it quivered like the hot landscape outside.

This picture of to-day in its frame of four hundred years ago did not produce that marked contrast between ancient and modern which is implied by the contrast of date. In comparison with cities, Weatherbury was immutable. The citizen's *Then* is the rustic's *Now*. In London, twenty or thirty years ago are old times; in Paris ten years, or five; in Weatherbury three or four score years were included in the mere present, and nothing less than a century set a mark on its face or tone. Five decades hardly modified the cut of a gaiter, the embroidery of a smock-frock, by the breadth of a hair. Ten generations failed to alter the turn of a single phrase. In these nooks the busy outsider's ancient times are only

old ; his old times are still new ; his present is futurity.

So the barn was natural to the shearers, and the shearers were in harmony with the barn.

The spacious ends of the building, answering ecclesiastically to nave and chancel extremities, were fenced off with hurdles, the sheep being all collected in a crowd within these two enclosures ; and in one angle a catching-pen was formed, in which three or four sheep were continuously kept ready for the shearers to seize without loss of time. In the background, mellowed by tawny shade, were the three women, Maryann Money, and Temperance and Soberness Miller, gathering up the fleeces and twisting ropes of wool with a wimble for tying them round. They were indifferently well assisted by the old maltster, who, when the malting season from October to April had passed, made himself useful upon any of the bordering farmsteads.

Behind all was Bathsheba, carefully watching the men to see that there was no cutting or wounding through carelessness, and that the animals were shorn close. Gabriel, who flitted and hovered under her bright eyes like a moth, did not shear continuously, half his time being spent in attending to the others and selecting the sheep for them. At the present moment he was

engaged in handing round a mug of mild liquor, supplied from a barrel in the corner, and cut pieces of bread and cheese.

Bathsheba, after throwing a glance here, a caution there, and lecturing one of the younger operators who had allowed his last finished sheep to go off among the flock without re-stamping it with her initials, came again to Gabriel, as he put down the luncheon to drag a frightened ewe to his shear-station, flinging it over upon its back with a dexterous twist of the arm. He lopped off the tresses about its head, and opened up the neck and collar, his mistress quietly looking on.

"She blushes at the insult," murmured Bathsheba, watching the pink flush which arose and overspread the neck and shoulders of the ewe where they were left bare by the clicking shears—a flush which was enviable, for its delicacy, by many queens of the coteries, and would have been creditable, for its promptness, to any woman in the world.

Poor Gabriel's soul was fed with a luxury of content by having her over him, her eyes critically regarding his skilful shears, which apparently were going to gather up a piece of the flesh at every close, and yet never did so. Like Guildenstern, Oak was happy in that he was not over happy. He had no wish to converse with her: that his bright

lady and himself formed one group, exclusively their own, and containing no others in the world, was enough.

So the chatter was all on her side. There is a loquacity that tells nothing, which was Bathsheba's; and there is a silence which says much: that was Gabriel's. Full of this dim and temperate bliss, he went on to fling the ewe over upon her other side, covering her head with his knee, gradually running the shears line after line round her dew-lap, thence about her flank and back, and finishing over the tail.

"Well done, and done quickly!" said Bathsheba, looking at her watch as the last snip resounded.

"How long, miss?" said Gabriel, wiping his brow.

"Three-and-twenty minutes and a half since you took the first lock from its forehead. It is the first time that I have ever seen one done in less than half an hour."

The clean, sleek creature arose from its fleece —how perfectly like Aphrodite rising from the foam, should have been seen to be realized—looking startled and shy at the loss of its garment, which lay on the floor in one soft cloud, united throughout, the portion visible being the inner surface only, which, never before exposed,

was white as snow, and without flaw or blemish of the minutest kind.

“Cain Ball !”

“Yes, Mister Oak ; here I be !”

Cainy now runs forward with the tar-pot. “B. E.” is newly stamped upon the shorn skin, and away the simple dam leaps, panting, over the board into the shirtless flock outside. Then up comes Maryann ; throws the loose locks into the middle of the fleece, rolls it up, and carries it into the background as three-and-a-half pounds of unadulterated warmth for the winter enjoyment of persons unknown and far away, who will, however, never experience the superlative comfort derivable from the wool as it here exists, new and pure—before the unctuousness of its nature whilst in a living state has dried, stiffened, and been washed out—rendering it just now as superior to anything *woollen* as cream is superior to milk-and-water.

But heartless circumstance could not leave entire Gabriel’s happiness of this morning. The rams, old ewes, and two-shear ewes had duly undergone their stripping, and the men were proceeding with the shearlings and hogs, when Oak’s belief that she was going to stand pleasantly by and time him through another performance was painfully interrupted by Farmer Boldwood’s ap-

pearance in the extremest corner of the barn. Nobody seemed to have perceived his entry, but there he certainly was. Boldwood always carried with him a social atmosphere of his own, which everybody felt who came near him; and the talk, which Bathsheba's presence had somewhat suppressed, was now totally suspended.

He crossed over towards Bathsheba, who turned to greet him with a carriage of perfect ease. He spoke to her in low tones, and she instinctively modulated her own to the same pitch, and her voice ultimately even caught the infection of his. She was far from having a wish to appear mysteriously connected with him; but woman at the impressible age gravitates to the larger body not only in her choice of words, which is apparent every day, but even in her shades of tone and humour, when the influence is great.

What they conversed about was not audible to Gabriel, who was too independent to get near, though too concerned to disregard. The issue of their dialogue was the taking of her hand by the courteous farmer to help her over the spreading-board into the bright May sunlight outside. Standing beside the sheep already shorn, they went on talking again. Concerning the flock? Apparently not. Gabriel theorized, not without truth, that in quiet discussion of any matter with-

in reach of the speakers' eyes, these are usually fixed upon it. Bathsheba demurely regarded a contemptible straw lying upon the ground, in a way which suggested less ovine criticism than womanly embarrassment. She became more or less red in the cheek, the blood wavering in uncertain flux and reflux over the sensitive space between ebb and flood. Gabriel sheared on, constrained and sad.

She left Boldwood's side, and he walked up and down alone for nearly a quarter of an hour. Then she reappeared in a new riding-habit of myrtle green, which fitted her to the waist as a rind fits its fruit; and young Bob Coggan led on her mare, Boldwood fetching his own horse from the tree under which it had been tied.

Oak's eyes could not forsake them; and in endeavouring to continue his shearing at the same time that he watched Boldwood's manner, he snipped the sheep in the groin. The animal plunged; Bathsheba instantly gazed towards it, and saw the blood.

"Oh Gabriel!" she exclaimed, with severe remonstrance, "you who are so strict with the other men—see what you are doing yourself!"

To an outsider there was not much to complain of in this remark; but to Oak, who knew Bathsheba to be well aware that she herself was the

cause of the poor ewe's wound, because she had wounded the ewe's shearer in a still more vital part, it had a sting which the abiding sense of his inferiority to both herself and Boldwood was not calculated to heal. But a manly resolve to recognize boldly that he had no longer a lover's interest in her, helped him occasionally to conceal a feeling.

"Bottle!" he shouted, in an unmoved voice of routine. Cainy Ball ran up, the wound was anointed, and the shearing continued.

Boldwood gently tossed Bathsheba into the saddle, and before they turned away she again spoke out to Oak with the same dominative and tantalizing graciousness.

"I am going now to see Mr. Boldwood's Leicesters. Take my place in the barn, Gabriel, and keep the men carefully to their work."

The horses' heads were put about, and they trotted away.

Boldwood's deep attachment was a matter of great interest among all around him; but, after having been pointed out for so many years as the perfect exemplar of thriving bachelorship, his lapse was an anticlimax somewhat resembling that of St. John Long's death by consumption in the midst of his proofs that it was not a fatal disease.

"That means matrimony," said Temperance Miller, following them out of sight with her eyes.

"I reckon that's the size o't," said Coggan, working along without looking up.

"Well, better wed over the mixen than over the moor," said Laban Tall, turning his sheep.

Henery Fray spoke, exhibiting miserable eyes at the same time: "I don't see why a maid should take a husband when she's bold enough to fight her own battles, and don't want a home; for 'tis keeping another woman out. But let it be, for 'tis a pity he and she should trouble two houses."

As usual with decided characters, Bathsheba invariably provoked the criticism of individuals like Henery Fray. Her emblazoned fault was to be too pronounced in her objections, and not sufficiently overt in her likings. We learn that it is not the rays which bodies absorb, but those which they reject, that give them the colours they are known by; and in the same way people are specialized by their dislikes and antagonisms, whilst their goodwill is looked upon as no attribute at all.

Henery continued in a more complaisant mood: "I once hinted my mind to her on a few things, as nearly as a battered frame dared to do so to such a froward piece. You all know, neighbours,

what a man I be, and how I come down with my powerful words when my pride is boiling with indignation ? ”

“ We do, we do, Henery.”

“ So I said, ‘ Mistress Everdene, there’s places empty, and there’s gifted men willing ; but the spite’—no, not the spite—I didn’t say spite—‘ but the villany of the contrarikind,’ I said (meaning womankind), ‘ keeps ’em out.’ That wasn’t too strong for her, say ? ”

“ Passably well put.”

“ Yes ; and I would have said it, had death and salvation overtook me for it. Such is my spirit when I have a mind ! ”

“ A true man, and proud as a Lucifer.”

“ You see the artfulness ? Why, ’twas about being baily really ; but I didn’t put it so plain that she could understand my meaning, so I could lay it on all the stronger. That was my depth ! . . . However, let her marry an she will. Perhaps ’tis high time. I believe Farmer Boldwood kissed her behind the spear-bed at the sheep-washing t’other day—that I do.”

“ What a lie ! ” said Gabriel.

“ Ah, neighbour Oak—how’st know ? ” said Henery, mildly.

“ Because she told me all that passed,” said Oak, with a pharisaical sense that he was not as other shearers in this matter.

"Ye have a right to believe it," said Henery, with dudgeon; "a very true right. But I may see a little distance into things. To be long-headed enough for a baily's place is a poor mere trifle—yet a trifle more than nothing. However, I look round upon life quite promiscuous. Do you conceive me, neighbours? My words, though made as simple as I can, may be rather deep for some heads."

"Oh yes, Henery, we quite conceive ye."

"A strange old piece, goodmen—whirled about from here to yonder, as if I were nothing worth. A little warped, too. But I have my depths; ha, and even my great depths! I might close with a certain shepherd, brain to brain. But no—Oh no!"

"A strange old piece, ye say!" interposed the maltster, in a querulous voice. "At the same time ye be no old man worth naming—no old man at all. Yer teeth baint half gone yet; and what's a old man's standing if so be his teeth baint gone? Weren't I stale in wedlock afore ye were out of arms? 'Tis a poor thing to be sixty, when there's people far past four-score—a boast weak as water."

It was the unvarying custom in Weatherbury to sink minor differences when the maltster had to be pacified.

"Weak as water! yes," said Jan Coggan.

"Maltster, we feel ye to be a wonderful old veteran man, and nobody can gainsay it."

"Nobody," said Joseph Poorgrass. "Ye are a very rare old spectacle, maltster, and we all respect ye for that gift."

"Ay, and as a young man, when my senses were in prosperity, I was likewise liked by a good-few who knowed me," said the maltster.

"'Ithout doubt you was—'ithout doubt."

The bent and hoary man was satisfied, and so apparently was Henery Fray. That matters should continue pleasant Maryann spoke, who, what with her brown complexion, and the working wrapper of rusty linsey, had at present the mellow hue of an old sketch in oils—notably some of Nicholas Poussin's:—

"Do anybody know of a crooked man, or a lame, or any second-hand fellow at all that would do for poor me?" said Maryann. "A perfect article I don't expect to get at my time of life. If I could hear of such a thing 'twould do me more good than toast and ale."

Coggan furnished a suitable reply. Oak went on with his shearing, and said not another word. Pestilent moods had come, and teased away his quiet. Bathsheba had shown indications of anointing him above his fellows by installing him as the bailiff that the farm imperatively

required. He did not covet the post relatively to the farm: in relation to herself, as beloved by him and unmarried to another, he had coveted it. His readings of her seemed now to be vapoury and indistinct. His lecture to her was, he thought, one of the absurdest mistakes. Far from coquetting with Boldwood, she had trifled with himself in thus feigning that she had trifled with another. He was inwardly convinced that, in accordance with the anticipations of his easy-going and worse-educated comrades, that day would see Boldwood the accepted husband of Miss Everdene. Gabriel at this time of his life had outgrown the instinctive dislike which every Christian boy has for reading the Bible, perusing it now quite frequently, and he inwardly said, “‘I find more bitter than death the woman whose heart is snares and nets!’” This was mere exclamation—the froth of the storm. He adored Bathsheba just the same.

“We workfolk shall have some lordly junketing, to-night,” said Cainy Ball, casting forth his thoughts in a new direction. “This morning I see ‘em making the great puddens in the milking-pails—lumps of fat as big as yer thumb, Mister Oak! I’ve never seed such splendid large knobs of fat before in the days of my life—they never

used to be bigger than a horse-bean. And there was a great black crock upon the brandise with his legs a-sticking out, but I don't know what was in within."

"And there's two bushels of biffins for apple-pies," said Maryann.

"Well, I hope to do my duty by it all," said Joseph Poorgrass, in a pleasant, masticating manner of anticipation. "Yes; victuals and drink is a cheerful thing, and gives nerves to the nerveless, if the form of words may be used. 'Tis the gospel of the body, without which he perish, so to speak it."

CHAPTER XXIII.

EVENTIDE—A SECOND DECLARATION.

FOR the shearing-supper a long table was placed on the grass-plot beside the house, the end of the table being thrust over the sill of the wide parlour-window and a foot or two into the room. Miss Everdene sat inside the window, facing down the table. She was thus at the head without mingling with the men.

This evening Bathsheba was unusually excited, her red cheeks and lips contrasting lustrously with the mazy skeins of her shadowy hair. She seemed to expect assistance, and the seat at the bottom of the table was at her request left vacant until after they had begun the meal. She then asked Gabriel to take the place and the duties appertaining to that end, which he did with great readiness.

At this moment Mr. Boldwood came in at the gate, and crossed the green to Bathsheba at the window. He apologized for his lateness: his arrival was evidently by arrangement.

"Gabriel," said she, "will you move again, please, and let Mr. Boldwood come there?"

Oak moved in silence back to his original seat.

The gentleman-farmer was dressed in cheerful style, in a new coat and white waistcoat, quite contrasting with his usual sober suits of grey. Inwardly, too, he was blithe, and consequently chatty to an exceptional degree. So also was Bathsheba now that he had come, though the uninvited presence of Pennyways, the bailiff who had been dismissed for theft, disturbed her equanimity for a while.

Supper being ended, Coggan began on his own private account, without reference to listeners:—

"I've lost my love, and I care not,
I've lost my love, and I care not ;
I shall soon have another
That's better than t'other ;
I've lost my love, and I care not."

This melody, when concluded, was received with a silently appreciative gaze at the table, implying that the performance, like a work by those established authors who are independent of notices in the papers, was a well-known delight which required no applause.

"Now, Master Poorgrass, your song," said Coggan.

"I be all but a shadder, and the gift is

wanting in me," said Joseph, diminishing himself.

"Nonsense; wou'st never be so ungrateful, Joseph—never!" said Coggan, expressing hurt feelings by an inflection of voice. "And mistress is looking hard at ye, as much as to say, 'Sing at once, Joseph Poorgrass.'"

"Faith, so she is; well, I must suffer it! . . . How do I bear her gaze? Do I blush prodigally? Just eye my features, and see if the tell-tale blood overpowers me much, neighbours."

"No, yer blushes be quite reasonable," said Coggan.

"A very reasonable depth indeed," testified Oak.

"I always tries to keep my colours from rising when a beauty's eyes get fixed on me," said Joseph, diffidently; "but if so be 'tis willed they do, they must."

"Now, Joseph, your song, please," said Bathsheba, from the window.

"Well, really, ma'am," he replied, in a yielding tone, "I don't know what to say. It would be a poor plain ballet of my own composure."

"Hear, hear!" said the supper-party.

Poorgrass, thus assured, trilled forth a flickering yet commendable piece of sentiment, the tune of which consisted of the key-note and another,

the latter being the sound chiefly dwelt upon. This was so successful that he rashly plunged into a second in the same breath, after a few false starts :—

“ I sow’-ed th’-e
I sow’-ed
I sow’-ed the’-e seeds’ of’ love’,
I-it was’ all’ i’-in the’-e spring’,
I-in A’-pril’, Ma’-ay, a’-nd sun’-ny’ June’,
When sma’-all bi’-irds they’ do’ sing.”

“ Well put out of hand,” said Coggan, at the end of the verse. “ ‘They do sing’ was a very taking paragraph.”

“ Ay ; and there was a pretty place at ‘seeds of love,’ and ’twas well let out. Though ‘love’ is a nasty high corner when a man’s voice is getting crazed. Next verse, Master Poorgrass.”

But during this rendering young Bob Coggan evinced one of those anomalies which will afflict little people when other persons are particularly serious, and, in trying to check his laughter, pushed down his throat as much of the table-cloth as he could get hold of, when after continuing hermetically sealed for a short time, his mirth ultimately burst out through his nose. Joseph perceived it, and with hectic cheeks of indignation instantly ceased singing. Coggan boxed Bob’s ears immediately.

“ Go on, Joseph—go on, and never mind the

young scamp," said Coggan. "'Tis a very catching ballet. Now then again—the next bar; I'll help ye to flourish up the shrill notes where yer wind is rather wheezy:—

"Oh the wi'-il-lo'-ow tree' will' twist',
And the wil'-low' tre'-ee wi'-ill twine'."

But the singer could not be set going again. Bob Coggan was sent home for his ill manners, and tranquility was restored by Jacob Smallbury, who volunteered a ballad as inclusive and interminable as that with which the worthy toper old Silenus amused on a similar occasion the swains Chromis and Mnasylus, and other jolly dogs of his day.

It was still the beaming time of evening, though night was stealthily making itself visible low down upon the ground, the western lines of light raking the earth without alighting upon it to any extent, or illuminating the dead levels at all. The sun had crept round the tree as a last effort before death, and then began to sink, the shearers' lower parts becoming steeped in embrowning twilight, whilst their heads and shoulders were still enjoying day, lacquered with a yellow of self-sustained brilliancy that seemed inherent rather than acquired.

The sun went down in an ochreous mist; but they sat, and talked on, and grew as merry as

the gods in Homer's heaven. Bathsheba still remained enthroned inside the window, and occupied herself in knitting, from which she sometimes looked up to view the fading scene outside. The slow twilight expanded and enveloped them completely before the signs of moving were shown.

Gabriel suddenly missed Farmer Boldwood from his place at the bottom of the table. How long he had been gone Oak did not know; but he had apparently withdrawn into the encircling dusk. Whilst he was thinking of this, Liddy brought candles into the back part of the room overlooking the shearers, and their lively new flames shone down the table and over the men, and dispersed among the green shadows behind. Bathsheba's form, still in its original position, was now again distinct between their eyes and the light, which revealed that Boldwood had gone inside the room, and was now sitting near her.

Next came the question of the evening. Would Miss Everdene sing to them the song she always sang so charmingly—"The Banks of Allan Water"—before they went home?

After a moment's consideration Bathsheba assented, beckoning to Gabriel, who hastened up into the coveted atmosphere at once.

"Have you brought your flute?" she whispered.

"Yes, miss."

"Play to my singing, then."

She stood up in the window-opening, facing the men, the candles behind her, Gabriel on her right hand, immediately outside the sash-frame. Boldwood had drawn up on her left, within the room. Her singing was soft and rather tremulous at first, but it soon swelled to a steady clearness. Subsequent events caused one of the verses to be remembered for many months, and even years, by more than one of those who were gathered there:—

"For his bride a soldier sought her,
And a winning tongue had he :
On the banks of Allan Water
None was gay as she!"

In addition to the dulcet piping of Gabriel's flute, Boldwood supplied a bass in his customary profound voice, uttering his notes so softly, however, as to abstain entirely from making anything like an ordinary duet of the song; they rather formed a rich unexplored shadow, which threw her tones into relief. The shearers reclined against each other as at suppers in the early ages of the world, and so silent and absorbed were they that her breathing could almost be heard between the bars; and at the end of the



SHE STOOD UP IN THE WINDOW-OPENING, FACING THE MEN.

ballad, when the last tone loitered on to an inexpressible close, there arose that buzz of pleasure which is the attar of applause.

It is scarcely necessary to state that Gabriel could not avoid noting the farmer's bearing to-night towards their entertainer. Yet there was nothing exceptional in his actions beyond what appertained to his time of performing them. It was when the rest were all looking away that Boldwood observed her; when they regarded her he turned aside; when they thanked or praised he was silent; when they were inattentive he murmured his thanks. The meaning lay in the difference between actions, none of which had any meaning of themselves; and the necessity of being jealous, which lovers are troubled with, did not lead Oak to under-estimate these signs.

Bathsheba then wished them good-night, withdrew from the window, and retired to the back part of the room, Boldwood thereupon closing the sash and the shutters, and shutting himself inside with her. Oak wandered away under the quiet and scented trees. Recovering from the softer impressions produced by Bathsheba's voice, the shearers rose to leave, Coggan turning to Pennyways as he pushed back the bench to pass out:—

"I like to give praise where praise is due, and the man deserves it—that 'a do so," he remarked, looking at the worthy thief comprehensively, as if he were the masterpiece of some world-renowned artist.

"I'm sure I should never have believed it if we hadn't proved it, so to allude," said Joseph Poorgrass, "that every cup, every one of the best knives and forks, and every empty bottle be in their place as perfect now as at the beginning, and not one stole at all."

"I'm sure I don't deserve half the praise you give me," said the virtuous thief, grimly.

"Well, I'll say this for Pennyways," added Coggan, "that whenever he do really make up his mind to do a noble thing in the shape of a good action, as I could see by his face he did to-night afore sitting down, he's generally able to carry it out. Yes, I'm proud to say, neighbours, that he's stole nothing at all."

"Well, 'tis an honest deed, and we thank ye for it, Pennyways," said Joseph; to which opinion the remainder of the company subscribed unanimously.

At this time of departure, when nothing more was visible of the inside of the parlour than a thin and still chink of light between the shutters, a passionate scene was in course of enactment there.

Miss Everdene and Boldwood were alone. Her cheeks had lost a great deal of their healthful fire from the very seriousness of her position; but her eye was bright with the excitement of a triumph—though it was a triumph which had rather been contemplated than desired.

She was standing behind a low arm-chair, from which she had just risen, and he was kneeling in it—inclining himself over its back towards her, and holding her hand in both his own. His body moved restlessly, and it was with what the poet calls a too happy happiness. This unwonted abstraction by love of all dignity from a man of whom it had ever seemed the chief component, was, in its distressing incongruity, a pain to her which quenched much of the pleasure she derived from the proof that she was idolized.

"I will try to love you," she was saying, in a trembling voice quite unlike her usual self-confidence. "And if I can believe in any way that I shall make you a good wife I shall indeed be willing to marry you. But, Mr. Boldwood, hesitation on so high a matter is honourable in any woman, and I don't want to give a solemn promise to-night. I would rather ask you to wait a few weeks till I can see my situation better."

"But you have every reason to believe that *then . . .*"

"I have every reason to hope that at the end of the five or six weeks, between this time and harvest, that you say you are going to be away from home, I shall be able to promise to be your wife," she said, firmly. "But remember this distinctly, I don't promise yet."

"It is enough; I don't ask more. I can wait on those dear words. And now, Miss Everdene, good-night!"

"Good-night," she said, graciously—almost tenderly; and Boldwood withdrew with a serene smile.

Bathsheba knew more of him now; he had entirely bared his heart before her, even until he had almost worn in her eyes the sorry look of a grand bird without the feathers that make it grand. She had been awestruck at her past temerity, and was struggling to make amends without thinking whether the sin quite deserved the penalty she was schooling herself to pay. To have brought all this about her ears was terrible; but after a while the situation was not without a fearful joy. The facility with which even the most timid women sometimes acquire a relish for the dreadful when that is amalgamated with a little triumph, is marvellous.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE SAME NIGHT—THE FIR PLANTATION.

AMONG the multifarious duties which Bathsheba had voluntarily imposed upon herself by dispensing with the services of a bailiff, was the particular one of looking round the homestead before going to bed, to see that all was right and safe for the night. Gabriel had almost constantly preceded her in this tour every evening, watching her affairs as carefully as any specially appointed officer of surveillance could have done; but this tender devotion was to a great extent unknown to his mistress, and as much as was known was somewhat thanklessly received. Women are never tired of bewailing man's fickleness in love, but they only seem to snub his constancy.

As watching is best done invisibly, she usually carried a dark lantern in her hand, and every now and then turned on the light to examine nooks and corners with the coolness of a metropolitan policeman. This coolness may have owed

its existence not so much to her fearlessness of expected danger as to her freedom from the suspicion of any ; her worst anticipated discovery being that a horse might not be well bedded, the fowls not all in, or a door not closed.

This night the buildings were inspected as usual, and she went round to the farm paddock. Here the only sounds disturbing the stillness were steady munchings of many mouths, and stentorian breathings from all but invisible noses, ending in snores and puffs like the blowing of bellows slowly. Then the munching would recommence, when the lively imagination might assist the eye to discern a group of pink-white nostrils, large as caverns, and very clammy and humid on their surfaces, not exactly pleasant to the touch until one got used to them ; the mouths beneath them having a great partiality for closing upon any fragment of Bathsheba's apparel which came within reach of their tongues. Above each of these a still keener vision suggested a brown forehead and two staring though not unfriendly eyes, and above all a pair of whitish crescent-shaped horns like two particularly new moons, an occasional stolid "moo!" proclaiming beyond the shade of a doubt that these phenomena were the features and persons of Daisy, Whitefoot, Bonny-lass, Jolly-O, Spot, Twinkle-eye, etc., etc.—the

respectable dairy of Devon cows belonging to Bathsheba aforesaid.

Her way back to the house was by a path through a young plantation of tapering firs, which had been planted some years earlier to shelter the premises from the north wind. By reason of the density overhead of the interwoven foliage it was gloomy there at cloudless noontide, twilight in the evening, dark as midnight at dusk, and black as the ninth plague of Egypt at midnight. To describe the spot is to call it a vast, low, naturally formed hall, the plumpy ceiling of which was supported by slender pillars of living wood, the floor being covered with a soft dun carpet of dead spikelets and mildewed cones, with a tuft of grass-blades here and there.

This bit of the path was always the crux of the night's ramble, though, before starting, her apprehensions of danger were not vivid enough to lead her to take a companion. Slipping along here covertly as Time, Bathsheba fancied she could hear footsteps entering the track at the opposite end. It was certainly a rustle of footsteps. Her own instantly fell as gently as snow-flakes. She reassured herself by a remembrance that the path was public, and that the traveller was probably some villager returning home, regretting, at the same time, that the meeting

should be about to occur in the darkest point of her route, even though only just outside her own door.

The noise approached, came close, and a figure was apparently on the point of gliding past her when something tugged at her skirt and pinned it forcibly to the ground. The instantaneous check nearly threw Bathsheba off her balance. In recovering she struck against warm clothes and buttons.

"A rum start, upon my soul!" said a masculine voice, a foot or so above her head. "Have I hurt you, mate?"

"No," said Bathsheba, attempting to shrink away.

"We have got hitched together somehow, I think."

"Yes."

"Are you a woman?"

"Yes."

"A lady, I should have said."

"It doesn't matter."

"I am a man."

"Oh!"

Bathsheba softly tugged again, but to no purpose.

"Is that a dark lantern you have? I fancy so," said the man.

"Yes."

"If you'll allow me I'll open it, and set you free."

A hand seized the lantern, the door was opened, the rays burst out from their prison, and Bathsheba beheld her position with astonishment.

The man to whom she was hooked was brilliant in brass and scarlet. He was a soldier. His sudden appearance was to darkness what the sound of a trumpet is to silence. Gloom, the *genius loci* at all times hitherto, was now totally overthrown, less by the lantern light than by what the lantern lighted. The contrast of this revelation with her anticipations of some sinister figure in sombre garb was so great that it had upon her the effect of a fairy transformation.

It was immediately apparent that the military man's spur had become entangled in the gimp which decorated the skirt of her dress. He caught a view of her face.

"I'll unfasten you in one moment, miss," he said, with new-born gallantry.

"Oh no—I can do it, thank you," she hastily replied, and stooped for the performance.

The unfastening was not such a trifling affair. The rowel of the spur had so wound itself among the gimp cords in those few moments, that separation was likely to be a matter of time.

He too stooped, and the lantern standing on

the ground betwixt them threw the gleam from its open side among the fir-tree *débris* and the blades of long damp grass with the effect of a large glowworm. It radiated upwards into their faces, and sent over half the plantation gigantic shadows of both man and woman, each dusky shape becoming distorted and mangled upon the tree-trunks till it wasted to nothing.

He looked hard into her eyes when she raised them for a moment; Bathsheba looked down again, for his gaze was too strong to be received pointblank with her own. But she had obliquely noticed that he was young and slim, and that he wore three chevrons upon his sleeve.

Bathsheba pulled again.

"You are a prisoner, miss; it is no use blinking the matter," said the soldier, drily. "I must cut your dress if you are in such a hurry."

"Yes—please do!" she exclaimed, helplessly.

"It wouldn't be necessary if you could wait a moment;" and he unwound a cord from the little wheel. She withdrew her own hand, but, whether by accident or design, he touched it. Bathsheba was vexed; she hardly knew why.

His unravelling went on, but it nevertheless seemed coming to no end. She looked at him again.

"Thank you for the sight of such a beautiful face!" said the young sergeant, without ceremony.

She coloured with embarrassment. "'Twas unwillingly shown," she replied, stiffly, and with as much dignity—which was very little—as she could infuse into a position of utter captivity.

"I like you the better for that incivility, miss," he said.

"I should have liked—I wish—you had never shown yourself to me by intruding here!" She pulled again, and the gathers of her dress began to give way like lilliputian musketry.

"I deserve such a chastisement as your words give me. But why should such a fair and dutiful girl have such an aversion to her father's sex?"

"Go on your way, please."

"What, Beauty, and drag you after me? Do but look; I never saw such a tangle!"

"Oh, 'tis shameful of you; you have been making it worse on purpose to keep me here—you have!"

"Indeed, I don't think so," said the sergeant, with a merry twinkle.

"I tell you you have!" she exclaimed, in high temper. "I insist upon undoing it. Now, allow me!"

"Certainly, miss; I am not of steel." He added a sigh which had as much archness in it as a sigh could possess without losing its nature

altogether. “I am thankful for beauty, even when ’tis thrown to me like a bone to a dog. These moments will be over too soon !”

She closed her lips in a determined silence.

Bathsheba was revolving in her mind whether by a bold and desperate rush she could free herself at the risk of leaving a portion of her skirt bodily behind her. The thought was too dreadful. The dress—which she had put on to appear stately at the supper—was the head and front of her wardrobe ; not another in her stock became her so well. And then, her appearance with half a skirt gone ! What woman in Bathsheba’s position, not naturally timid, and within call of her retainers, would have bought escape from a dashing soldier at so dear a price ?

“All in good time ; it will soon be done, I perceive,” said her cool friend.

“This trifling provokes, and—and——”

“Not too cruel !”

“—Insults me !”

“It is done in order that I may have the pleasure of apologizing to so charming a woman, which I straightway do most humbly, madam,” he said, bowing low.

Bathsheba really knew not what to say.

“I’ve seen a good many women in my time,” continued the young man in a murmur, and more

thoughtfully than hitherto, critically regarding her bent head at the same time; “but I’ve never seen a woman so beautiful as you. Take it or leave it—be offended or like it—I don’t care.”

“Who are you, then, who can so well afford to despise opinion?”

“No stranger. Sergeant Troy. I am staying in this place.—There! it is undone at last, you see. Your light fingers were more eager than mine. I wish it had been the knot of knots, which there’s no untying.”

This was worse and worse. She started up, and so did he. How to decently get away from him—that was her difficulty now. She sidled off inch by inch, the lantern in her hand, till she could see the redness of his coat no longer.

“Ah, Beauty; good-bye!” he said.

She made no reply, and, reaching a distance of twenty or thirty yards, turned about, and ran indoors.

Liddy had just retired to rest. In ascending to her own chamber, Bathsheba opened the girl’s door an inch or two, and said,—

“Liddy, is any soldier staying in the village—sergeant somebody—rather gentlemanly for a sergeant, and good looking—a red coat with blue facings?”

“No, miss. . . . No, I say; but really it might

be Sergeant Troy home on furlough, though I have not seen him. He was here once in that way when the regiment was at Casterbridge."

"Yes; that's the name. Had he a moustache—no whiskers or beard?"

"He had."

"What kind of a person is he?"

"Oh! miss—I blush to name it—a gay man. But I know him to be very quick and trim, who might have made his thousands, like a squire. Such a clever young dand as he is! He's a doctor's son by name, which is a great deal; and he's an earl's son by nature!"

"Which is a great deal more. Fancy! Is it true?"

"Yes. And he was brought up so well, and sent to Casterbridge Grammar School for years and years. Learnt all languages while he was there; and it was said he got on so far that he could take down Chinese in shorthand; but that I don't answer for, as it was only reported. However, he wasted his gifted lot, and listed a soldier; but even then he rose to be a sergeant without trying at all. Ah! such a blessing it is to be high-born; nobility of blood will shine out even in the ranks and files. And is he really come home, miss?"

"I believe so. Good-night, Liddy."

After all, how could a cheerful wearer of skirts be permanently offended with the man? There are occasions when girls like Bathsheba will put up with a great deal of unconventional behaviour. When they want to be praised, which is often; when they want to be mastered, which is sometimes; and when they want no nonsense, which is seldom. Just now the first feeling was in the ascendant with Bathsheba, with a dash of the second. Moreover, by chance or by devilry, the ministrant was antecedently made interesting by being a handsome stranger who had evidently seen better days.

So she could not clearly decide whether it was her opinion that he had insulted her or not.

“Was ever anything so odd!” she at last exclaimed to herself, in her own room. “And was ever anything so meanly done as what I did —to skulk away like that from a man who was only civil and kind!” Clearly she did not think his bare-faced praise of her person an insult now.

It was a fatal omission of Boldwood’s that he had never once told her she was beautiful.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE NEW ACQUAINTANCE DESCRIBED.

IDIOSYNCRASY and vicissitude had combined to stamp Sergeant Troy as an exceptional being.

He was a man to whom memories were an incumbrance, and anticipations a superfluity. Simply feeling, considering, and caring for what was before his eyes, he was vulnerable only in the present. His outlook upon time was as a transient flash of the eye now and then : that projection of consciousness into days gone by and to come, which makes the past a synonym for the pathetic and the future a word for circumspection, was foreign to Troy. With him the past was yesterday ; the future, tomorrow ; never, the day after.

On this account he might, in certain lights, have been regarded as one of the most fortunate of his order. For it may be argued with great plausibility that reminiscence is less an endowment than a disease, and that expectation in its only comfortable form—that of absolute faith—is practically

an impossibility; whilst in the form of hope and the secondary compounds, patience, impatience, resolve, curiosity, it is a constant fluctuation between pleasure and pain.

Sergeant Troy, being entirely innocent of the practice of expectation, was never disappointed. To set against this negative gain there may have been some positive losses from a certain narrowing of the higher tastes and sensations which it entailed. But limitation of the capacity is never recognized as a loss by the loser therefrom: in this attribute moral or æsthetic poverty contrasts plausibly with material, since those who suffer do not mind it, whilst those who mind it soon cease to suffer. It is not a denial of anything to have been always without it, and what Troy had never enjoyed he did not miss; but, being fully conscious that what sober people missed he enjoyed, his capacity, though really less, seemed greater than theirs.

He was perfectly truthful towards men, but to women lied like a Cretan—a system of ethics, above all others, calculated to win popularity at the first flush of admission into lively society; and the possibility of the favour gained being but transient had reference only to the future.

He never passed the line which divides the spruce vices from the ugly; and hence, though his morals had never been applauded, disapproval of

them had frequently been tempered with a smile. This treatment had led to his becoming a sort of forestaller of other men's experiences of the glorious class, to his own aggrandizement as a Corinthian, rather than to the moral profit of his hearers.

His reason and his propensities had seldom any reciprocating influence, having separated by mutual consent long ago : thence it sometimes happened that, while his intentions were as honourable as could be wished, any particular deed formed a dark background which threw them into fine relief. The sergeant's vicious phases being the offspring of impulse, and his virtuous phases of cool meditation, the latter had a modest tendency to be oftener heard of than seen.

Troy was full of activity, but his activities were less of a locomotive than a vegetative nature ; and, never being based upon any original choice of foundation or direction, they were exercised on whatever object chance might place in their way. Hence, whilst he sometimes reached the brilliant in speech, because that was spontaneous, he fell below the commonplace in action, from inability to guide incipient effort. He had a quick comprehension and considerable force of character ; but, being without the power to combine them, the comprehension became engaged with trivialities whilst waiting for the will to direct it, and the

force wasted itself in useless grooves through unheeding the comprehension.

He was a fairly well-educated man for one of middle class—exceptionally well educated for a common soldier. He spoke fluently and unceasingly. He could in this way be one thing and seem another: for instance, he could speak of love and think of dinner; call on the husband to look at the wife; be eager to pay and intend to owe.

The wondrous power of flattery in *passados* at woman is a perception so universal as to be remarked upon by many people almost as automatically as they repeat a proverb, or say that they are Christians and the like, without thinking much of the enormous corollaries which spring from the preposition. Still less is it acted upon for the good of the complemental being alluded to. With the majority such an opinion is shelved with all those trite aphorisms which require some catastrophe to bring their tremendous meanings thoroughly home. When expressed with some amount of reflectiveness it seems co-ordinate with a belief that this flattery must be reasonable to be effective. It is to the credit of men that few attempt to settle the question by experiment, and it is for their happiness, perhaps, that accident has never settled it for them. Nevertheless, that the power of a male

dissembler, who by the simple process of deluging her with untenable fictions charms the female wisely, becomes limitless and absolute to the extremity of perdition, is a truth taught to many by unsought and wringing occurrences. And some—frequently those who are definable as middle-aged youths, though not always—profess to have attained the same knowledge by other and converse experiences, and jauntily continue their indulgence in such experiences with terrible effect. Sergeant Troy was one. He had been known to observe casually that in dealing with womankind the only alternative to flattery was cursing and swearing. There was no third method. “Treat them fairly, and you are a lost man,” he would say.

This person’s public appearance in Weatherbury promptly followed his arrival there. A week or two after the shearing, Bathsheba, feeling a nameless relief of spirits on account of Boldwood’s absence, approached her hayfields and looked over the hedge towards the haymakers. They consisted in about equal proportions of gnarled and flexuous forms, the former being the men, the latter the women, who wore tilt bonnets covered with nankeen, which hung in a curtain upon their shoulders. Coggan and Mark Clark were mowing in a less forward meadow, Clark humming a tune

to the strokes of his scythe, to which Jan made no attempt to keep time with his. In the first mead they were already loading hay, the women raking it into cocks and windrows, and the men tossing it upon the waggon.

From behind the waggon a bright scarlet spot emerged, and went on loading unconcernedly with the rest. It was the gallant sergeant, who had come haymaking for pleasure; and nobody could deny that he was doing the mistress of the farm real knight-service by this voluntary contribution of his labour at a busy time.

As soon as she had entered the field Troy saw her, and sticking his pitchfork into the ground and picking up his walking-cane, he came forward. Bathsheba blushed with half-angry embarrassment, and adjusted her eyes as well as her feet to the direct line of her path.

CHAPTER XXVI.

SCENE ON THE VERGE OF THE HAY-MEAD.

“ Ah, Miss Everdene ! ” said the sergeant, lifting his diminutive cap. “ Little did I think it was you I was speaking to the other night. And yet, if I had reflected, the ‘ Queen of the Corn-market ’ (truth is truth at any hour of the day or night, and I heard you so named in Casterbridge yesterday), the ‘ Queen of the Corn-market,’ I say, could be no other woman. I step across now to beg your forgiveness a thousand times for having been led by my feelings to express myself too strongly for a stranger. To be sure I am no stranger to the place—I am Sergeant Troy, as I told you, and I have assisted your uncle in these fields no end of times when I was a lad. I have been doing the same for you to-day.”

“ I suppose I must thank you for that, Sergeant Troy,” said the “ Queen of the Corn-market,” in an indifferently grateful tone.

The sergeant looked hurt and sad. “ Indeed

you must not, Miss Everdene," he said. "Why could you think such a thing necessary?"

"I am glad it is not."

"Why? if I may ask without offence."

"Because I don't much want to thank you for anything."

"I am afraid I have made a hole with my tongue that my heart will never mend. Oh these intolerable times: that ill-luck should follow a man for honestly telling a woman she is beautiful! 'Twas the most I said—you must own that; and the least I could say—that I own myself."

"There is some talk I could do without more easily than money."

"Indeed. That remark seems somewhat digressive."

"It means that I would rather have your room than your company."

"And I would rather have curses from you than kisses from any other woman; so I'll stay here."

Bathsheba was absolutely speechless. And yet she could not help feeling that the assistance he was rendering forbade a harsh repulse.

"Well," continued Troy, "I suppose there is a praise which is rudeness, and that may be mine. At the same time there is a treatment which is injustice, and that may be yours. Because a plain

blunt man, who has never been taught concealment, speaks out his mind without exactly intending it, he's to be snapped off like the son of a sinner."

"Indeed there's no such case between us," she said, turning away. "I don't allow strangers to be bold and impudent—even in praise of me."

"Ah—it is not the fact but the method which offends you," he said, carelessly. "But I have the sad satisfaction of knowing that my words, whether pleasing or offensive, are unmistakably true. Would you have had me look at you, and tell my acquaintance that you are quite a commonplace woman, to save you the embarrassment of being stared at if they come near you? Not I. I couldn't tell any such ridiculous lie about a beauty to encourage a single woman in England in too excessive a modesty."

"It is all pretence—what you are saying!" exclaimed Bathsheba, laughing in spite of herself at the sergeant's sly method. "You have a rare invention, Sergeant Troy. Why couldn't you have passed by me that night, and said nothing?—that was all I meant to reproach you for."

"Because I wasn't going to. Half the pleasure of a feeling lies in being able to express it on the spur of the moment, and I let out mine. It would have been just the same if you had been the reverse

person—ugly and old—I should have exclaimed about it in the same way."

"How long is it since you have been so afflicted with strong feeling, then?"

"Oh, ever since I was big enough to know loveliness from deformity."

"'Tis to be hoped your sense of the difference you speak of doesn't stop at faces, but extends to morals as well."

"I won't speak of morals or religion—my own or anybody else's. Though perhaps I should have been a very good Christian if you pretty women hadn't made me an idolator."

Bathsheba moved on to hide the irrepressible dimples of merriment. Troy followed, whirling his cane.

"But—Miss Everdene—you do forgive me?"

"Hardly."

"Why?"

"You say such things."

"I said you were beautiful, and I'll say so still, for, by —, so you are! The most beautiful ever I saw, or may I fall dead this instant! Why, upon my——"

"Don't—don't! I won't listen to you—you are so profane!" she said, in a restless state between distress at hearing him and a *penchant* to hear more.

"I again say you are a most fascinating woman.

There's nothing remarkable in my saying so, is there? I'm sure the fact is evident enough. Miss Everdene, my opinion may be too forcibly let out to please you, and, for the matter of that, too insignificant to convince you, but surely it is honest, and why can't it be excused?"

"Because it—it isn't a correct one," she femininely murmured.

"Oh, fie—fie! Am I any worse for breaking the third of that Terrible Ten than you for breaking the ninth?"

"Well, it doesn't seem *quite* true to me that I am fascinating," she replied evasively.

"Not so to you: then I say with all respect that, if so, it is owing to your modesty, Miss Everdene. But surely you must have been told by everybody of what everybody notices? and you should take their words for it."

"They don't say so exactly."

"Oh yes, they must!"

"Well, I mean to my face, as you do," she went on, allowing herself to be further lured into a conversation that intention had rigorously forbidden.

"But you know they think so?"

"No—that is—I certainly have heard Liddy say they do, but . . ." She paused.

Capitulation—that was the purport of the simple reply, guarded as it was—capitulation, unknown

to herself. Never did a fragile tailless sentence convey a more perfect meaning. The careless sergeant smiled within himself, and probably the devil smiled too from a loop-hole in Tophet, for the moment was the turning-point of a career. Her tone and mien signified beyond mistake that the seed which was to lift the foundation had taken root in the chink: the remainder was a mere question of time and natural seriate changes.

"There the truth comes out!" said the soldier, in reply. "Never tell me that a young lady can live in a buzz of admiration without knowing something about it. Ah, well, Miss Everdene, you are—pardon my blunt way—you are rather an injury to our race than otherwise."

"How—indeed?" she said, opening her eyes.

"Oh, it is true enough. I may as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb (an old country saying, not of much account, but it will do for a rough soldier), and so I will speak my mind, regardless of your pleasure, and without hoping or intending to get your pardon. Why, Miss Everdene, it is in this manner that your good looks may do more harm than good in the world." [The Sergeant looked down the mead in critical abstraction.] "Probably some one man on an average falls in love with each ordinary woman. She can marry him: he is content, and leads a useful life. Such women as

you a hundred men always covet—your eyes will bewitch scores on scores into an unavailing fancy for you—you can only marry one of that many. Out of these say twenty will endeavour to drown the bitterness of despised love in drink: twenty more will mope away their lives without a wish or attempt to make a mark in the world, because they have no ambition apart from their attachment to you: twenty more—the susceptible person myself possibly among them—will be always draggling after you, getting where they may just see you, doing desperate things. Men are such constant fools! The rest may try to get over their passion with more or less success. But all these men will be saddened. And not only those ninety-nine men, but the ninety-nine women they might have married are saddened with them. There's my tale. That's why I say that a woman so charming as yourself, Miss Everdene, is hardly a blessing to her race."

The handsome sergeant's features were during this speech as rigid and stern as John Knox's in addressing his gay young queen.

Seeing she made no reply, he said, "Do you read French?"

"No; I began, but when I got to the verbs, father died," she said simply.

"I do—when I have an opportunity, which

latterly has not been often (my mother was a Parisienne)—and there's a proverb they have, ‘Qui aime bien, châtie bien’—‘He chastens who loves well.’ Do you understand me?”

“Ah!” she replied, and there was even a little tremulousness in the usually cool girl’s voice; “if you can only fight half as winningly as you can talk, you are able to make a pleasure of a bayonet wound!” And then poor Bathsheba instantly perceived her slip in making this admission: in hastily trying to retrieve it, she went from bad to worse. “Don’t, however, suppose that *I* derive any pleasure from what you tell me.”

“I know you do not—I know it perfectly,” said Troy, with much hearty conviction on the exterior of his face: and altering the expression to moodiness; “when a dozen men are ready to speak tenderly to you, and give the admiration you deserve without adding the warning you need, it stands to reason that my poor rough-and-ready mixture of praise and blame cannot convey much pleasure. Fool as I may be, I am not so conceited as to suppose that.”

“I think you—are conceited, nevertheless,” said Bathsheba, hesitatingly, and looking askance at a reed she was fitfully pulling with one hand, having lately grown feverish under the soldier’s system of procedure—not because the nature

of his cajolery was entirely unperceived, but because its vigour was overwhelming.

"I would not own it to anybody else—nor do I exactly to you. Still, there might have been some self-conceit in my foolish supposition the other night. I knew that what I said in admiration might be an opinion too often forced upon you to give any pleasure, but I certainly did think that the kindness of your nature might prevent you judging an uncontrolled tongue harshly—which you have done—and thinking badly of me, and wounding me this morning, when I am working hard to save your hay."

"Well, you need not think more of that: perhaps you did not mean to be rude to me by speaking out your mind: indeed, I believe you did not," said the shrewd woman, in painfully innocent earnest. "And I thank you for giving help here. But—but mind you don't speak to me again in that way, or in any other, unless I speak to you."

"Oh, Miss Bathsheba! That is too hard!"

"No, it isn't. Why is it?"

"You will never speak to me; for I shall not be here long. I am soon going back again to the miserable monotony of drill—and perhaps our regiment will be ordered out soon. And yet you take away the one little ewe-lamb of pleasure

that I have in this dull life of mine. Well, perhaps generosity is not a woman's most marked characteristic."

"When are you going from here?" she asked, with some interest.

"In a month."

"But how can it give you pleasure to speak to me?"

"Can you ask, Miss Everdene—knowing as you do—what my offence is based on?"

"If you do care so much for a silly trifle of that kind, then, I don't mind doing it," she uncertainly and doubtingly answered. "But you can't really care for a word from me? you only say so—I think you only say so."

"That's unjust—but I won't repeat the remark. I am too gratified to get such a mark of your friendship at any price to cavil at the tone. I *do*, Miss Everdene, care for it. You may think a man foolish to want a mere word—just a good morning. Perhaps he is—I don't know. But you have never been a man looking upon a woman, and that woman yourself."

"Well."

"Then you know nothing of what such an experience is like—and Heaven forbid that you ever should."

"Nonsense, flatterer! What is it like? I am interested in knowing."

"Put shortly, it is not being able to think, hear, or look in any direction except one without wretchedness, nor there without torture."

"Ah, sergeant, it won't do—you are pretending," she said, shaking her head dubiously.
"Your words are too dashing to be true."

"I am not, upon the honour of a soldier."

"But *why* is it so?—Of course I ask for mere pastime."

"Because you are so distracting—and I am so distracted."

"You look like it."

"I am indeed."

"Why you only saw me the other night."

"That makes no difference. The lightning works instantaneously. I loved you then, at once—as I do now."

Bathsheba surveyed him curiously, from the feet upward, as high as she liked to venture her glance, which was not quite so high as his eyes.

"You cannot and you don't," she said, demurely. "There is no such sudden feeling in people. I won't listen to you any longer. Dear me, I wish I knew what o'clock it is—I am going—I have wasted too much time here already."

The sergeant looked at his watch and told her. "What, haven't you a watch, miss?" he inquired.

"I have not just at present—I am about to get a new one."

"No. You shall be given one. Yes—you shall. A gift, Miss Everdene—a gift."

And before she knew what the young man was intending, a heavy gold watch was in her hand.

"It is an unusually good one for a man like me to possess," he quietly said. "That watch has a history. Press the spring and open the back."

She did so.

"What do you see?"

"A crest and a motto."

"A coronet with five points, and beneath, *Cedit amor rebus*—‘Love yields to circumstance.’ Its the motto of the Earls of Severn. That watch belonged to the last lord, and was given to my mother’s husband, a medical man, for his use till I came of age, when it was to be given to me. It was all the fortune that ever I inherited. That watch has regulated imperial interests in its time—the stately ceremonial, the courtly assignation, pompous travels, and lordly sleeps. Now it is yours."

"But, Sergeant Troy, I cannot take this—I cannot!" she exclaimed, with round-eyed wonder. "A gold watch! What are you doing? Don’t be such a dissembler!"

The sergeant retreated to avoid receiving back

"No, no; don't say so. I have reasons for reserve which I cannot explain."

"Let it be, then, let it be," he said, receiving back the watch at last; "I must be leaving you now. And will you speak to me for these few weeks of my stay?"

"Indeed I will. Yet, I don't know if I will! Oh, why did you come and disturb me so!"

"Perhaps in setting a gin, I have caught myself. Such things have happened. Well, will you let me work in your fields?" he coaxed.

"Yes, I suppose so; if it is any pleasure to you."

"Miss Everdene, I thank you."

"No, no."

"Good-bye!"

The sergeant lifted his cap from the slope of his head, bowed, replaced it, and returned to the distant group of haymakers.

Bathsheba could not face the haymakers now. Her heart erratically flitting hither and thither from perplexed excitement, hot, and almost tearful, she retreated homeward, murmuring, "Oh, what have I done! what does it mean! I wish I knew how much of it was true!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

HIVING THE BEES.

THE Weatherbury bees were late in their swarming this year. It was in the latter part of June, and the day after the interview with Troy in the hay-field, that Bathsheba was standing in her garden, watching a swarm in the air and guessing their probable settling-place. Not only were they late this year, but unruly. Sometimes throughout a whole season all the swarms would alight on the lowest attainable bough—such as part of a currant-bush or espalier apple-tree; next year they would, with just the same unanimity, make straight off to the uppermost member of some tall, gaunt costard, or quarrington, and there defy all invaders who did not come armed with ladders and staves to take them.

This was the case at present. Bathsheba's eyes, shaded by one hand, were following the ascending multitude against the unexplored stretch of blue till they ultimately halted by one of the unwieldy

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This was the case at present. Bathsheba's eyes, shaded by one hand, were following the ascending multitude against the unexplored stretch of blue till they ultimately halted by one of the unwieldy

trees spoken of. A process was observable somewhat analogous to that of alleged formations of the universe, time and times ago. The bustling swarm had swept the sky in a scattered and uniform haze, which now thickened to a nebulous centre: this glided on to a bough and grew still denser, till it formed a solid black spot upon the light.

The men and women being all busily engaged in saving the hay—even Liddy had left the house for the purpose of lending a hand—Bathsheba resolved to hive the bees herself, if possible. She had dressed the hive with herbs and honey, fetched a ladder, brush and crook, made herself impregnable with armour of leather gloves, straw hat and large gauze veil—once green but now faded to snuff colour—and ascended a dozen rungs of the ladder. At once she heard, not ten yards off, a voice that was beginning to have a strange power in agitating her.

“Miss Everdene, let me assist you; you should not attempt such a feat alone.”

Troy was just opening the garden gate.

Bathsheba flung down the brush, crook and empty hive, pulled the skirt of her dress tightly round her ankles in a tremendous flurry, and as well as she could slid down the ladder. By the time she reached the bottom Troy was there also, and he stooped to pick up the hive.

"How fortunate I am to have dropped in at this moment!" exclaimed the sergeant.

She found her voice in a minute. "What! and will you shake them in for me?" she asked, in what, for a defiant girl, was a faltering way; though, for a timid girl, it would have seemed a brave way enough.

"Will I!" said Troy. "Why, of course I will. How blooming you are to-day!" Troy flung down his cane and put his foot on the ladder to ascend.

"But you must have on the veil and gloves, or you'll be stung fearfully!"

"Ah, yes. I must put on the veil and gloves. Will you kindly show me how to fix them properly?"

"And you must have the broad-brimmed hat, too; for your cap has no brim to keep the veil off, and they'd reach you face."

"The broad-brimmed hat, too, by all means."

So a whimsical fate ordered that her hat should be taken off—veil and all attached—and placed upon his head, Troy tossing his own into a gooseberry bush. Then the veil had to be tied at its lower edge round his collar and the gloves put on him.

He looked such an extraordinary object in this guise that, flurried as she was, she could

not avoid laughing outright. It was the removal of yet another stake from the palisade of cold manners which had kept him off.

Bathsheba looked on from the ground whilst he was busy sweeping and shaking the bees from the tree, holding up the hive with the other hand for them to fall into. She made use of an unobserved minute whilst his attention was absorbed in the operation to arrange her plumes a little. He came down holding the hive at arm's length, behind which trailed a cloud of bees.

"Upon my life," said Troy, through the veil, "holding up this hive makes one's arm ache worse than a week of sword-exercise." When the manœuvre was complete he approached her. "Would you be good enough to untie me and let me out? I am nearly stifled inside this silk cage."

To hide her embarrassment during the unwonted process of untying the string about his neck, she said :—

"I have never seen that you spoke of."

"What?"

"The sword-exercise."

"Ah! would you like to?" said Troy,

Bathsheba hesitated. She had heard wondrous reports from time to time by dwellers in Weatherbury, who had by chance sojourned awhile in

Casterbridge, near the barracks, of this strange and glorious performance, the sword-exercise. Men and boys who had peeped through chinks or over walls into the barrack-yard returned with accounts of its being the most flashing affair conceivable; accoutrements and weapons glistening like stars—here, there, around—yet all by rule and compass. So she said mildly what she felt strongly.

“Yes; I should like to see it very much.”

“And so you shall; you shall see me go through it.”

“No! How?”

“Let me consider.”

“Not with a walking-stick—I don’t care to see that. It must be a real sword.”

“Yes, I know; and I have no sword here; but I think I could get one by the evening. Now, will you do this?”

Troy bent over her and murmured some suggestion in a low voice.

“Oh no, indeed!” said Bathsheba, blushing. “Thank you very much, but I couldn’t on any account.”

“Surely you might? Nobody would know.”

She shook her head, but with a weakened negation. “If I were to,” she said, “I must bring Liddy too. Might I not?”

Troy looked far away. "I don't see why you want to bring her," he said coldly.

An unconscious look of assent in Bathsheba's eyes betrayed that something more than his coldness had made her also feel that Liddy would be superfluous in the suggested scene. She had felt it, even whilst making the proposal.

"Well, I won't bring Liddy—and I'll come. But only for a very short time," she added; "a very short time."

"It will not take five minutes," said Troy.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE HOLLOW AMID THE FERNS.

THE hill opposite one end of Bathsheba's dwelling extended into an uncultivated tract of land, covered at this season with tall thickets of brake fern, plump and diaphanous from recent rapid growth, and radiant in hues of clear and untainted green.

At eight o'clock this midsummer evening, whilst the bristling ball of gold in the west still swept the tips of the ferns with its long, luxuriant rays, a soft brushing-by of garments might have been heard among them, and Bathsheba appeared in their midst, their soft, feathery arms caressing her up to her shoulders. She paused, turned, went back over the hill and down again to her own door, whence she cast a farewell glance upon the spot she had just left, having resolved not to remain near the place after all.

She saw a dim spot of artificial red moving round the shoulder of the rise. It disappeared on the other side.

She waited one minute—two minutes—thought of Troy's disappointment at her non-fulfilment of a promised engagement, tossed on her hat again, ran up the garden, clambered over the bank and followed the original direction. She was now literally trembling and panting at this her temerity in such an errant undertaking; her breath came and went quickly, and her eyes shone with an infrequent light. Yet go she must. She reached the verge of a pit in the middle of the ferns. Troy stood in the bottom, looking up towards her.

"I heard you rustling through the fern before I saw you," he said, coming up and giving her his hand to help her down the slope.

The pit was a hemispherical concave, naturally formed, with a top diameter of about thirty feet, and shallow enough to allow the sunshine to reach their heads. Standing in the centre, the sky overhead was met by a circular horizon of fern: this grew nearly to the bottom of the slope and then abruptly ceased. The middle within the belt of verdure was floored with a thick flossy carpet of moss and grass intermingled, so yielding that the foot was half buried within it.

"Now," said Troy, producing the sword, which, as he raised it into the sunlight, gleamed a sort of greeting, like a living thing, "first, we have four right and four left cuts; four right and four left

thrusts. Infantry cuts and guards are more interesting than ours, to my mind ; but they are not so swashing. They have seven cuts and three thrusts. So much as a preliminary. Well, next, our cut one is as if you were sowing your corn—so." Bathsheba saw a sort of rainbow, upside down in the air, and Troy's arm was still again. "Cut two, as if you were hedging—so. Three, as if you were reaping—so. Four, as if you were threshing—in that way. Then the same on the left. The thrusts are these: one, two, three, four, right; one, two, three, four, left." He repeated them. "Have 'em again?" he said. "One, two——"

She hurriedly interrupted: "I'd rather not; though I don't mind your twos and fours; but your ones and threes are terrible!"

"Very well. I'll let you off the ones and threes. Next, cuts, points and guards altogether." Troy duly exhibited them. "Then there's pursuing practice, in this way." He gave the movements as before. "There, those are the stereotyped forms. The infantry have two most diabolical upward cuts, which we are too humane to use. Like this—three, four."

"How murderous and bloodthirsty!"

"They are rather deathy. Now I'll be more interesting, and let you see some loose play—giving all

the cuts and points, infantry and cavalry, quicker than lightning, and as promiscuously—with just enough rule to regulate instinct and yet not to fetter it. You are my antagonist, with this difference from real warfare, that I shall miss you every time by one hair's breadth, or perhaps two. Mind you don't flinch, whatever you do."

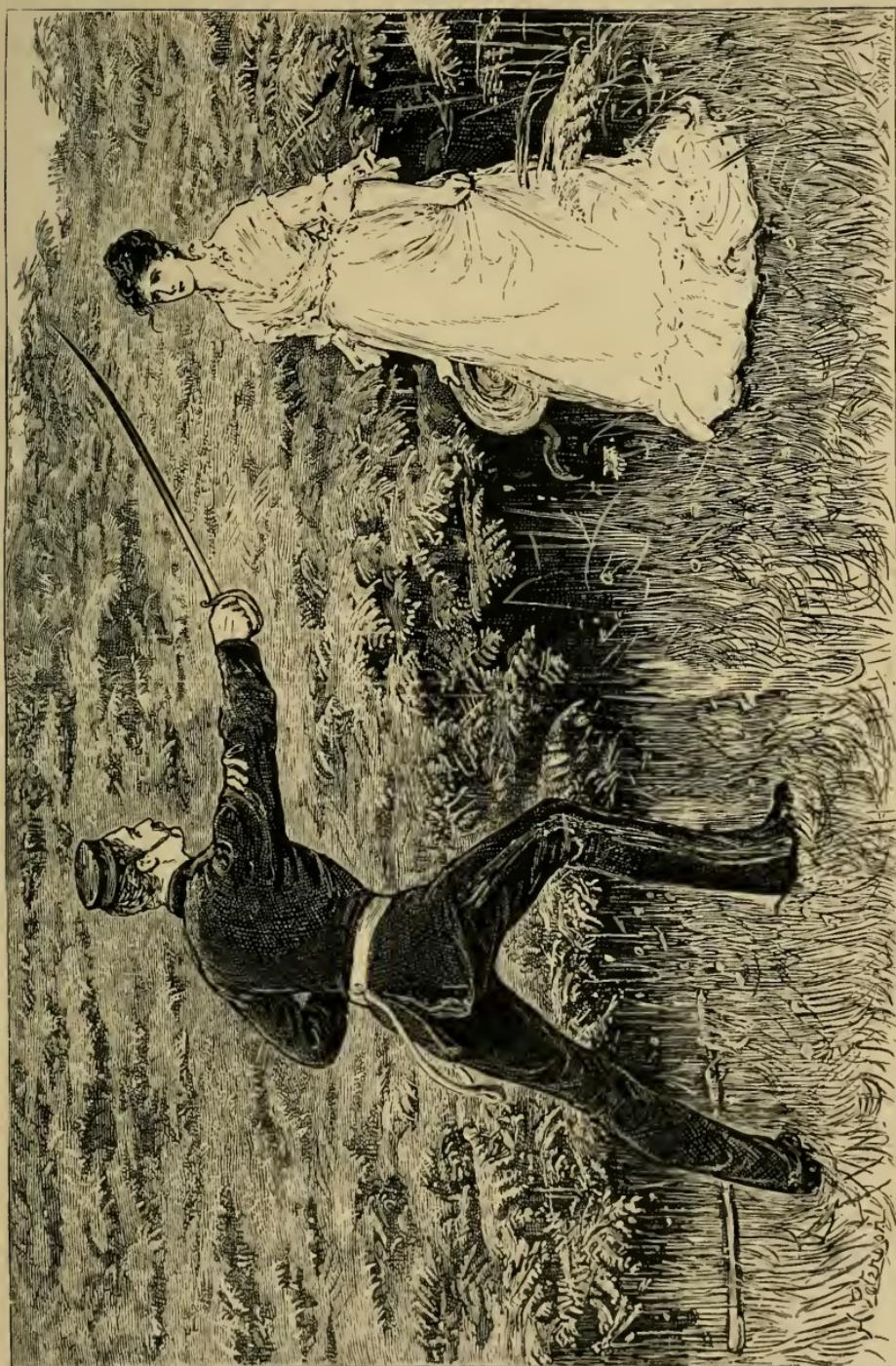
"I'll be sure not to!" she said invincibly.

He pointed to about a yard in front of him.

Bathsheba's adventurous spirit was beginning to find some grains of relish in these highly novel proceedings. She took up her position as directed, facing Troy.

"Now just to learn whether you have pluck enough to let me do what I wish, I'll give you a preliminary test."

He flourished the sword by way of introduction number two, and the next thing of which she was conscious was that the point and blade of the sword were darting with a gleam towards her left side, just above her hip; then of their reappearance on her right side, emerging as it were from between her ribs, having apparently passed through her body. The third item of consciousness was that of seeing the same sword, perfectly clean and free from blood held vertically in Troy's hand (in the position technically called "recover swords"). All was as quick as electricity.



SHE TOOK IT UP HER POSITION AS DIRECTED.

"Oh!" she cried out in affright, pressing her hand to her side. "Have you run me through?—no, you have not! Whatever have you done!"

"I have not touched you," said Troy quietly. "It was mere sleight of hand. The sword passed behind you. Now you are not afraid, are you? Because if you are I can't perform. I give my word that I will not only not hurt you, but not once touch you."

"I don't think I am afraid. You are quite sure you will not hurt me?"

"Quite sure."

"Is the sword very sharp?"

"Oh no—only stand as still as a statue. Now!"

In an instant the atmosphere was transformed to Bathsheba's eyes. Beams of light caught from the low sun's rays, above, around, in front of her, well-nigh shut out earth and heaven—all emitted in the marvellous evolutions of Troy's reflecting blade, which seemed everywhere at once, and yet nowhere specially. These circumambient gleams were accompanied by a keen sibilation that was almost a whistling—also springing from all sides of her at once. In short, she was enclosed in a firmament of light, and of sharp hisses, resembling a sky-full of meteors close at hand.

Never since the broad-sword became the

national weapon, had there been more dexterity shown in its management than by the hands of Sergeant Troy, and never had he been in such splendid temper for the performance as now in the evening sunshine among the ferns with Bathsheba. It may safely be asserted with respect to the closeness of his cuts, that had it been possible for the edge of the sword to leave in the air a permanent substance wherever it flew past, the space left untouched would have been a complete mould of Bathsheba's figure.

Behind the luminous streams of this *aurora militaris*, she could see the hue of Troy's sword-arm, spread in a scarlet haze over the space covered by its motions, like a twanged bowstring, and behind all Troy himself, mostly facing her; sometimes, to show the rear cuts, half turned away, his eye nevertheless always keenly measuring her breadth and outline, and his lips tightly closed in sustained effort. Next, his movements lapsed slower, and she could see them individually. The hissing of the sword had ceased, and he stopped entirely.

"That outer loose lock of hair wants tidying," he said, before she had moved or spoken. "Wait: I'll do it for you."

An arc of silver shone on her right side: the sword had descended. The lock dropped to the ground.

"Bravely borne!" said Troy. "You didn't flinch a shade's thickness. Wonderful in a woman!"

"It was because I didn't expect it. Oh you have spoilt my hair!"

"Only once more."

"No—no! I am afraid of you—indeed I am!" she cried.

"I won't touch you at all—not even your hair. I am only going to kill that caterpillar settling on you. Now: still!"

It appeared that a caterpillar had come from the fern and chosen the front of her bodice as his resting place. She saw the point glisten towards her bosom, and seemingly enter it. Bathsheba closed her eyes in the full persuasion that she was killed at last. However, feeling just as usual, she opened them again.

"There it is, look," said the sergeant, holding his sword before her eyes.

The caterpillar was spitted upon its point.

"Why it is magic!" said Bathsheba, amazed.

"Oh no—dexterity. I merely gave point to your bosom where the caterpillar was, and instead of running you through checked the extension a thousandth of an inch short of your surface."

"But how could you chop off a curl of my hair with a sword that has no edge?"

"No edge! This sword will shave like a razor. Look here."

He touched the palm of his hand with the blade, and then, lifting it, showed her a thin shaving of scarf-skin dangling therefrom.

"But you said before beginning that it was blunt and couldn't cut me!"

"That was to get you to stand still, and so ensure your safety. The risk of injuring you through your moving was too great not to compel me to tell you an untruth to obviate it."

She shuddered. "I have been within an inch of my life, and didn't know it!"

"More precisely speaking, you have been within half an inch of being pared alive two hundred and ninety-five times."

"Cruel, cruel, 'tis of you!"

"You have been perfectly safe nevertheless. My sword never errs." And Troy returned the weapon to the scabbard.

Bathsheba, overcome by a hundred tumultuous feelings resulting from the scene, abstractedly sat down on a tuft of heather.

"I must leave you now," said Troy softly. "And I'll venture to take and keep this in remembrance of you."

She saw him stoop to the grass, pick up the winding lock which he had severed from her

manifold tresses, twist it round his fingers, unfasten a button in the breast of his coat, and carefully put it inside. She felt powerless to withstand or deny him. He was altogether too much for her, and Bathsheba seemed as one who, facing a reviving wind, finds it to blow so strongly that it stops the breath.

He drew near and said, "I must be leaving you." He drew nearer still. A minute later and she saw his scarlet form disappear amid the ferny thicket, almost in a flash, like a brand swiftly waved.

That minute's interval had brought the blood beating into her face, set her stinging as if aflame to the very hollows of her feet, and enlarged emotion to a compass which quite swamped thought. It had brought upon her a stroke resulting, as did that of Moses in Horeb, in a liquid stream—here a stream of tears. She felt like one who has sinned a great sin.

The circumstance had been the gentle dip of Troy's mouth downwards upon her own. He had kissed her.

CHAPTER XXIX.

PARTICULARS OF A TWILIGHT WALK.

WE now see the element of folly distinctly mingling with the many varying particulars which made up the character of Bathsheba Everdene. It was almost foreign to her intrinsic nature. It was introduced as lymph on the dart of Eros, and eventually permeated and coloured her whole constitution. Bathsheba, though she had too much understanding to be entirely governed by her womanliness, had too much womanliness to use her understanding to the best advantage. Perhaps in no minor point does woman astonish her helpmate more than in the strange power she possesses of believing cajoleries that she knows to be false—except, indeed, in that of being utterly sceptical on strictures that she knows to be true.

Bathsheba loved Troy in the way that only self-reliant women love when they abandon their self-reliance. When a strong woman recklessly throws away her strength she is worse than a weak woman who has never had any strength to throw away.

One source of her inadequacy is the novelty of the occasion. She has never had practice in making the best of such a condition. Weakness is doubly weak by being new.

Bathsheba was not conscious of guile in this matter. Though in one sense a woman of the world, it was, after all, that world of daylight coteries, and green carpets, wherein cattle form the passing crowd and winds the busy hum ; where a quiet family of rabbits or hares lives on the other side of your party-wall, where your neighbour is everybody in the tything, and where calculation is confined to market-days. Of the fabricated tastes of good fashionable society she knew but little, and of the formulated self-indulgence of bad, nothing at all. Had her utmost thoughts in this direction been distinctly worded (and by herself they never were) they would only have amounted to such a matter as that she felt her impulses to be pleasanter guides than her discretion. Her love was entire as a child's, and though warm as summer it was fresh as spring. Her culpability lay in her making no attempt to control feeling by subtle and careful inquiry into consequences. She could show others the steep and thorny way, but “reck'd not her own rede.”

And Troy's deformities lay deep down from a woman's vision, whilst his embellishments were

upon the very surface; thus contrasting with homely Oak, whose defects were patent to the blindest, and whose virtues were as metals in a mine.

The difference between love and respect was markedly shown in her conduct. Bathsheba had spoken of her interest in Boldwood with the greatest freedom to Liddy, but she had only communed with her own heart concerning Troy.

All this infatuation Gabriel saw, and was troubled thereby from the time of his daily journey a-field to the time of his return, and on to the small hours of many a night. That he was not beloved had hitherto been his great sorrow; that Bathsheba was getting into the toils was now a sorrow greater than the first, and one which nearly obscured it. It was a result which paralleled the oft-quoted observation of Hippocrates concerning physical pains.

That is a noble though perhaps an unpromising love which not even the fear of breeding aversion in the bosom of the one beloved can deter from combating his or her errors. Oak determined to speak to his mistress. He would base his appeal on what he considered her unfair treatment of Farmer Boldwood, now absent from home.

An opportunity occurred one evening when she had gone for a short walk by a path through the

neighbouring corn-fields. It was dusk when Oak, who had not been far a-field that day, took the same path and met her returning, quite pensively, as he thought.

The wheat was now tall, and the path was narrow; thus the way was quite a sunken groove between the embowering thicket on either side. Two persons could not walk abreast without damaging the crop, and Oak stood aside to let her pass.

"Oh, is it Gabriel?" she said. "You are taking a walk too. Good-night."

"I thought I would come to meet you, as it is rather late," said Oak, turning and following at her heels when she had brushed somewhat quickly by him.

"Thank you, indeed, but I am not very fearful."

"Oh no; but there are bad characters about."

"I never meet them."

Now Oak, with marvellous ingenuity, had been going to introduce the gallant sergeant through the channel of "bad characters." But all at once the scheme broke down, it suddenly occurring to him that this was rather a clumsy way, and too bare-faced to begin with. He tried another preamble.

"And as the man who would naturally come to meet you is away from home, too—I mean Farmer Boldwood—why, thinks I, I'll go," he said.

"Ah, yes." She walked on without turning her head, and for many steps nothing further was heard from her quarter than the rustle of her dress against the heavy corn-ears. Then she resumed rather tartly :—

"I don't quite understand what you meant by saying that Mr. Boldwood would naturally come to meet me."

"I meant on account of the wedding which they say is likely to take place between you and him, miss. Forgive my speaking plainly."

"They say what is not true," she returned quickly. "No marriage is likely to take place between us."

Gabriel now put forth his unobscured opinion, for the moment had come. "Well, Miss Everdene," he said, "putting aside what people say, I never in my life saw any courting if this is not a courting of you."

Bathsheba would probably have terminated the conversation there and then by flatly forbidding the subject, had not her conscious weakness of position allured her to palter and argue in endeavours to better it.

"Since this subject has been mentioned," she said very emphatically, "I am glad of the opportunity of clearing up a mistake which is very common and very provoking. I didn't definitely

promise Mr. Boldwood anything. I have never cared for him. I respect him, and he has urged me to marry him. But I have given him no distinct answer. As soon as he returns I shall do so; and the answer will be that I cannot think of marrying him."

"People are full of mistakes, seemingly."

"They are."

"The other day they said you were trifling with him, and you almost proved that you were not; lately they have said that you are not, and you straightway begin to show——"

"That I am, I suppose you mean."

"Well, I hope they speak the truth."

"They do, but wrongly applied. I don't trifle with him; but then, I have nothing to do with him."

Oak was unfortunately led on to speak of Boldwood's rival in a wrong tone to her after all. "I wish you had never met that young Sergeant Troy, miss," he sighed.

Bathsheba's steps became faintly spasmodic.
"Why?" she asked.

"He is not good enough for you."

"Did any one tell you to speak to me like this?"

"Nobody at all."

"Then it appears to me that Sergeant Troy

does not concern us here," she said, intractably. " Yet I must say that Sergeant Troy is an educated man, and quite worthy of any woman. He is well born."

" His being higher in learning and birth than the ruck of soldiers is anything but a proof of his worth. It shows his course to be downward."

" I cannot see what this has to do with our conversation. Mr. Troy's course is not by any means downward; and his superiority *is* a proof of his worth."

" I believe him to have no conscience at all. And I cannot help begging you, miss, to have nothing to do with him. Listen to me this once—only this once! I don't say he's such a bad man as I have fancied—I pray to God he is not. But since we don't exactly know what he is, why not behave as if he *might* be bad, simply for your own safety? Don't trust him, mistress; I ask you not to trust him so."

" Why, pray?"

" I like soldiers, but this one I do not like," he said, sturdily. " The nature of his calling may have tempted him astray, and what is mirth to the neighbours is ruin to the woman. When he tries to talk to you again, why not turn away with a short 'Good day;' and when you see him coming one way, turn the other.

When he says anything laughable, fail to see the point and don't smile, and speak of him before those who will report your talk as 'that fantastical man,' or 'that Sergeant What's-his-name.' 'That man of a family that has come to the dogs.' Don't be unmannerly towards him, but harmless-uncivil, and so get rid of the man."

No Christmas robin detained by a window-pane ever pulsed as did Bathsheba now.

"I say—I say again—that it doesn't become you to talk about him. Why he should be mentioned passes me quite!" she exclaimed desperately. "I know this, th-th-that he is a thoroughly conscientious man—blunt sometimes even to rudeness—but always speaking his mind about you plain to your face!"

"Oh."

"He is as good as anybody in this parish! He is very particular too, about going to church—yes, he is!"

"I am afeard nobody ever saw him there. I never did certainly."

"The reason of that is," she said eagerly, "that he goes in privately by the old tower door, just when the service commences, and sits at the back of the gallery. He told me so."

This supreme instance of Troy's goodness fell upon Gabriel's ears like the thirteenth stroke of

a crazy clock. It was not only received with utter incredulity as regarded itself, but threw a doubt on all the assurances that had preceded it.

Oak was grieved to find how entirely she trusted him. He brimmed with deep feeling as he replied in a steady voice, the steadiness of which was spoilt by the palpableness of his great effort to keep it so :—

“ You know, mistress, that I love you, and shall love you always. I only mention this to bring to your mind that at any rate I would wish to do you no harm : beyond that I put it aside. I have lost in the race for money and good things, and I am not such a fool as to pretend to you now I am poor, and you have got altogether above me. But Bathsheba, dear mistress, this I beg you to consider—that, both to keep yourself well honoured among the workfolk, and in common generosity to an honourable man who loves you as well as I, you should be more discreet in your bearing towards this soldier.”

“ Don’t, don’t, don’t ! ” she exclaimed, in a choking voice.

“ Are you not more to me than my own affairs, and even life ! ” he went on. “ Come, listen to me ! I am six years older than you, and Mr. Boldwood is ten years older than I, and consider—I do beg of you to consider before it is too late—how safe you would be in his hands ! ”

Oak's allusion to his own love for her lessened, to some extent, her anger at his interference; but she could not really forgive him for letting his wish to marry her be eclipsed by his wish to do her good, any more than for his slighting treatment of Troy.

"I wish you to go elsewhere," she said, a pallor of face invisible to the eye being suggested by the trembling words. "Do not remain on this farm any longer. I don't want you—I beg you to go!"

"That's nonsense," said Oak, calmly. "This is the second time you have pretended to dismiss me; and what's the use of it?"

"Pretended! You shall go, sir—your lecturing I will not hear! I am mistress here."

"Go, indeed—what folly will you say next? Treating me like Dick, Tom and Harry when you know that a short time ago my position was as good as yours! Upon my life, Bathsheba, it is too barefaced. You know, too, that I can't go without putting things in such a strait as you wouldn't get out of I can't tell when. Unless, indeed, you'll promise to have an understanding man as bailiff, or manager, or something. I'll go at once if you'll promise that."

"I shall have no bailiff; I shall continue to be my own manager," she said decisively.

"Very well, then; you should be thankful to me for staying. How would the farm go on with nobody to mind it but a woman? But mind this, I don't wish you to feel you owe me anything. Not I. What I do, I do. Sometimes I say I should be as glad as a bird to leave the place—for don't suppose I'm content to be a nobody. I was made for better things. However, I don't like to see your concerns going to ruin, as they must if you keep in this mind. . . . I hate taking my own measures so plainly, but upon my life, your provoking ways make a man say what he wouldn't dream of other times! I own to being rather interfering. But you know well enough how it is, and who she is that I like too well, and feel too much like a fool about to be civil to her."

It is more than probable that she privately and unconsciously respected him a little for this grim fidelity, which had been shown in his tone even more than in his words. At any rate she murmured something to the effect that he might stay if he wished. She said more distinctly, "Will you leave me alone now? I don't order it as a mistress—I ask it as a woman, and I expect you not to be so uncourteous as to refuse."

"Certainly I will, Miss Everdene," said Gabriel, gently. He wondered that the request

should have come at this moment, for the strife was over, and they were on a most desolate hill, far from every human habitation, and the hour was getting late. He stood still and allowed her to get far ahead of him till he could only see her form upon the sky.

A distressing explanation of this anxiety to be rid of him at that point now ensued. A figure apparently rose from the earth beside her. The shape beyond all doubt was Troy's. Oak would not be even a possible listener, and at once turned back till a good two hundred yards were between the lovers and himself.

Gabriel went home by way of the churchyard. In passing the tower he thought of what she had said about the sergeant's virtuous habit of entering the church unperceived at the beginning of service. Believing that the little gallery door alluded to was quite disused, he ascended the external flight of steps at the top of which it stood, and examined it. The pale lustre yet hanging in the north-western heaven was sufficient to show that a sprig of ivy had grown from the wall across the door to a length of more than a foot, delicately tying the panel to the stone jamb. It was a decisive proof that the door had not been opened at least since Troy came back to Weatherbury.

CHAPTER XXX.

HOT CHEEKS AND TEARFUL EYES.

HALF AN HOUR later Bathsheba entered her own house. There burnt upon her face when she met the light of the candles the flush and excitement which were little less than chronic with her now. The farewell words of Troy, who had accompanied her to the very door, still lingered in her ears. He had bidden her adieu for two days, which were, so he stated, to be spent at Bath in visiting some friends. He had also kissed her a second time.

It is only fair to Bathsheba to explain here a little fact which did not come to light till a long time afterwards: that Troy's presentation of himself so aptly at the roadside this evening was not by any distinctly preconcerted arrangement. He had hinted—she had forbidden; and it was only on the chance of his still coming that she had dismissed Oak, fearing a meeting between them just then.

She now sank down into a chair, wild and

perturbed by all these new and fevering sequences. Then she jumped up with a manner of decision, and fetched her desk from a side table.

In three minutes, without pause or modification, she had written a letter to Boldwood, at his address beyond Casterbridge, saying mildly but firmly that she had well considered the whole subject he had brought before her and kindly given her time to decide upon; that her final decision was that she could not marry him. She had expressed to Oak an intention to wait till Boldwood came home before communicating to him her conclusive reply. But Bathsheba found that she could not wait.

It was impossible to send this letter till the next day; yet to quell her uneasiness by getting it out of her hands, and so, as it were, setting the act in motion at once, she arose to take it to any one of the women who might be in the kitchen.

She paused in the passage. A dialogue was going on in the kitchen, and Bathsheba and Troy were the subject of it.

“If he marry her, she’ll gie up farming.”

“ ‘Twill be a gallant life, but may bring some trouble between the mirth—so say I.”

“Well, I wish I had half such a husband.”

Bathsheba had too much sense to mind seriously what her servitors said about her; but

too much womanly redundancy of speech to leave alone what was said till it died the natural death of unminded things. She burst in upon them.

"Who are you speaking of?" she asked.

There was a pause before anybody replied. At last Liddy said frankly, "What was passing was a bit of a word about yourself, miss."

"I thought so! Maryann and Liddy and Temperance—now I forbid you to suppose such things. You know I don't care the least for Mr. Troy—not I. Everybody knows how much I hate him.—Yes," repeated the froward young person, "*hate him!*"

"We know you do, miss," said Liddy; "and so do we all."

"I hate him to," said Maryann.

"Maryann—Oh you perjured woman! How you can speak that wicked story!" said Bathsheba, excitedly. "You admired him from your heart only this morning in the very world, you did. Yes, Maryann, you know it!"

"Yes, miss, but so did you. He is a wild scamp now, and you are right to hate him."

"He's *not* a wild scamp! How dare you to my face! I have no right to hate him, nor you, nor anybody. But I am a silly woman. What is it to me what he is? You know it is nothing. I don't care for him; I don't mean to defend his

good name, not I. Mind this, if any of you say a word against him you'll be dismissed instantly."

She flung down the letter and surged back into the parlour, with a big heart and tearful eyes, Liddy following her.

"Oh miss!" said mild Liddy, looking pitifully into Bathsheba's face. "I am sorry we mistook you so! I did think you cared for him; but I see you don't now."

"Shut the door, Liddy."

Liddy closed the door, and went on: "People always say such foolery, miss. I'll make answer hencefor'ard, 'Of course a lady like Miss Everdene can't love him;' I'll say it out in plain black and white."

Bathsheba burst out: "O Liddy, are you such a simpleton? Can't you read riddles? Can't you see? Are you a woman yourself?"

Liddy's clear eyes rounded with wonderment.

"Yes; you must be a blind thing, Liddy!" she said, in reckless abandonment and grief. "Oh, I love him to very distraection and misery and agony. Don't be frightened at me, though perhaps I am enough to frighten any innocent woman. Come closer—closer." She put her arms round Liddy's neck. "I must let it out to somebody; it is wearing me away. Don't you yet know enough

of me to see through that miserable denial of mine? O God, what a lie it was! Heaven and my Love forgive me. And don't you know that a woman who loves at all thinks nothing of perjury when it is balanced against her love? There, go out of the room; I want to be quite alone."

Liddy went towards the door.

"Liddy, come here. Solemnly swear to me that he's not a bad man; that it is all lies they say about him!"

"But, miss, how can I say he is not if——"

"You graceless girl. How can you have the cruel heart to repeat what they say? Unfeeling thing that you are. . . . But *I'll* see if you or anybody else in the village, or town either, dare do such a thing!" She started off, pacing from fireplace to door, and back again.

"No, miss. I don't—I know it is not true," said Liddy, frightened at Bathsheba's unwonted vehemence.

"I suppose you only agree with me like that to please me. But, Liddy, he *cannot be* bad, as is said. Do you hear?"

"Yes, miss, yes."

"And you don't believe he is?"

"I don't know what to say, miss," said Liddy, beginning to cry. "If I say No, you don't believe me; and if I say Yes, you rage at me."

"Say you don't believe it—say you don't!"

"I don't believe him to be so bad as they make out."

"He is not bad at all. . . . My poor life and heart, how weak I am!" she moaned, in a relaxed, desultory way, heedless of Liddy's presence. "Oh, how I wish I had never seen him! Loving is misery for women always. I shall never forgive my Maker for making me a woman, and dearly am I beginning to pay for the honour of owning a pretty face." She freshened and turned to Liddy suddenly. "Mind this, Lydia Smallbury, if you repeat anywhere a single word of what I have said to you inside this closed door, I'll never trust you, or love you, or have you with me a moment longer—not a moment."

"I don't want to repeat anything," said Liddy with womanly dignity of a diminutive order; "but I don't wish to stay with you. And, if you please, I'll go at the end of the harvest, or this week, or to-day . . . I don't see that I deserve to be put upon and stormed at for nothing!" concluded the small woman, bigly.

"No, no, Liddy; you must stay!" said Bathsheba, dropping from haughtiness to entreaty with capricious inconsequence. "You must not notice my being in a taking just now. You are not as a servant—you are a companion to me.

Dear, dear—I don't know what I am doing since this miserable ache o' my heart has weighted and worn upon me so. What shall I come to! I suppose I shall get further and further into troubles. I wonder sometimes if I am doomed to die in the Union. I am friendless enough, God knows."

"I won't notice anything, nor will I leave you!" sobbed Liddy, impulsively putting up her lips to Bathsheba's, and kissing her.

Then Bathsheba kissed Liddy, and all was smooth again.

"I don't often cry, do I, Lidd? but you have made tears come into my eyes," she said, a smile shining through the moisture. "Try to think him a good man, won't you, dear Liddy?"

"I will, miss, indeed."

"He is a sort of steady man in a wild way, you know. That's better than to be as some are, wild in a steady way. I am afraid that's how I am. And promise me to keep my secret—do, Liddy! And do not let them know that I have been crying about him, because it will be dreadful for me, and no good to him, poor thing!"

"Death's head himself shan't wring it from me, mistress, if I've a mind to keep anything; and I'll always be your friend," replied Liddy, emphatically, at the same time bringing a few more tears

into her own eyes, not from any particular necessity, but from an artistic sense of making herself in keeping with the remainder of the picture, which seems to influence women at such times. "I think God likes us to be good friends, don't you?"

"Indeed I do."

"And, dear miss, you won't harry me and storm at me, will you? because you seem to swell so tall as a lion then, and it frightens me. Do you know, I fancy you would be a match for any man when you are in one o' your takings."

"Never! do you?" said Bathsheba, slightly laughing, though somewhat seriously alarmed by this Amazonian picture of herself. "I hope I am not a bold sort of maid—mannish?" she continued, with some anxiety.

"Oh no, not mannish; but so almighty womanish that 'tis getting on that way sometimes. Ah! miss," she said, after having drawn her breath very sadly in and sent it very sadly out, "I wish I had half your failing that way. 'Tis a great protection to a poor maid in these days!"

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